

A hand is holding a piece of crumpled white paper with blue cursive handwriting. The paper is held over a wooden desk. On the desk, there is a red folder, a black notebook, a yellow pencil, and a yellow spiral notebook. The background is a white wall. The entire image is framed by a red border.

*I Heard
the Pastor's
Daughter
is Gay*

**Luana
Reach Torres**

*I Heard the Pastor's
Daughter Is Gay*

Luana Reach Torres

Regal Crest

Nederland, Texas

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To my parents, David and Sandy,
Whose love and acceptance
I could not do without.

Chapter One

"WHAT HAPPENS IN Vegas, stays in Vegas," except herpes and HPV, that is. It's our motto. Visit Sin City. Throw away your money. Cheat on your spouse. Drink all the poison your liver can handle. This is America's playground. You absolutely have to come to Las Vegas.

I hope you know I'm being sarcastic. You probably know the commercialized version of Vegas. The neon lights, poker tables, and slot machines. The celebrities and entertainers. The high-hopes of walking away as the next Vegas millionaire. Well, if you stay here longer than two weeks, you'll come face to face with a neon billboard-sized reality: the city of Las Vegas sucks.

It's dirty here. Art and culture are scarce. If you're a teen, good luck finding a decent role-model. Real talk. No one cares about kids in this city. We're just a waste of space, since we're too young for the gaming industry to make money off us. Yes, the city of "lost wages" is lame. For those reasons, I spend a ridiculous amount of time in church. Most people don't know it, but here in Vegas, there are more churches than there are casinos. Most kids don't realize how fun church really is.

Our youth program is awesome. We go bowling, hiking, camping, snowboarding, and more. My parents never forbid me from going on church excursions. We sometimes volunteer at homeless kitchens and pick up trash in parks. It keeps us out of trouble.

Well, depends on what you consider trouble.

If falling in love with someone of the same-sex is considered trouble, I was on the path to doom. And yes, it did cause a lot of trouble.

Important factor: my father is the senior pastor of this very big, very conservative church. Thus, being honest about the whole thing isn't your typical coming-out scenario. Because my father is who he is, and believes what he does, coming out wouldn't be saying "I'm queer, I'm here, and I hope you still love me." Although such a message is difficult enough, what it really says is "I'm choosing to suffer eternal damnation in Hell, and there's nothing you can do about it."

Still, so many questions surface. Am I really gay? Can I change? If I can, do I want to? Please don't think I woke up one day and decided to be gay. I don't think anyone in their right mind

would do that. It all started when I met Jay Miller, the girl who turned my world upside down.

I REMEMBER the day clearly. The cafeteria smelled like pizza. The jocks in the corner were being loud and obnoxious, like usual. My best friend, Chanel, would've met me, but she was home sick. I had other friends, but none of them ate lunch on a regular basis. I was fine having lunch alone.

"What's up, Katie?" That was Ben, Varsity Wrestling. He stood beside my table. "Why don't you come to the kick back at my cousin's place?"

From the corner of my eye, I noticed his white and red varsity jacket. Ben wore it so often, one could spot him a hundred feet away. I said, "No thanks. I'm not really into it."

Ben took a seat and ran his fingers through his blond hair. "Why not? I'm bringing enough beer for both of us."

I averted any eye-contact. I didn't want him to think I was playing hard to get. "No thanks, Ben." I dug through my bag.

"Are you shy?"

I didn't bother looking up at him. I pulled out my phone and texted Chanel.

U suck 4 not coming 2 school.

Ben won't leave me alone!

"I'm not shy. I'm just not interested."

"Are you gonna eat that?"

I glanced over as Ben pointed to my chocolate glazed donut. "Yes."

He frowned. "What are you interested in?"

An idea flickered in my mind and I pulled out my chemistry text book. "I'm interested in chemical science." I opened it up to the chapter I'd read the night before. "Do you want to study with me?"

Ben glanced at the book and peeked at his wrist watch. "No. Science is boring." I thought he was about to get up and leave. He drummed his fingers on the table. "So, about the kick back, I can pick you up and—"

"I'm not interested, Ben. Ok? I said no three times. Please, leave me alone." There was laughter. Someone was eavesdropping. It came from behind me. I glanced over my shoulder, and I saw her.

It was as if time had halted upon my heart's command. My eyes rested on her face, content to watch as her black hair fell and curled under her chin. I marveled at her lips, full and glossed in glimmer. Her smile imprinted itself onto my chest. Yet, it wasn't until she met my gaze, that I fell in love. Those eyes were light brown, behind dark lashes. My heart stopped, I think, and I quickly

looked away.

Her demeanor was masculine with a feminine touch, or was it feminine with a masculine touch?

I turned and saw that Ben had gotten up.

He narrowed his eyes on me. "I know why. You think you're better than everyone. You're not, you know." Ben left.

I turned again toward Jay, but she was in conversation with a bunch of skater kids. I'd never seen her before. I wanted to know who she was, and why she was eavesdropping. I was really bothered though, because I thought she was cute.

I'm a normal girl. I look at other girls and I say "she's pretty," or "she looks great in that outfit," or "I wish I had her hair." However, this was different. Way different.

Jay Miller was really cute. When I say cute, I mean the kind of cute you can stare at for hours, the kind of cute that pops into your head in random moments, and plasters a cheesy smile on your face. The kind of cute you want to touch.

I heard it was normal for straight people to have gay thoughts. Almost every girl I know, straight or not, would totally do Angelina Jolie. Wouldn't it make homosexual thoughts normal? If gay thoughts aren't normal, then only gay people would have them. If only gay people have them, there would really be such a thing as gay people, not people who practice homosexuality, but real gay people. So, are gay thoughts normal for straight people, or do only gay people have them? Was I a straight person with a gay thought, or, could I really be gay?

That was just stupid. I couldn't be gay.

Let me illustrate, for you, my religious history. My father is the rock star of Christian pastors. They say he has the gift of influence, because when he speaks, people listen. They come to church and they bring their friends, who bring their friends, who bring more friends. The church just keeps growing.

Grandpa was a pastor. Great grandpa was a pastor. Great-great grandpa was a pastor. Leadership is the legacy of my father's blood, and religion is my heritage.

As a child I went to church five times a week, and I loved it. I've known Jesus all my life. I've been praying as long as I've been speaking. Church was a huge playground to me, and it was always fun. Even now, at sixteen, I love church. I love Jesus. I love the Christian culture.

I don't care what people say about me in school. They say I'm self-righteous because I don't drink or stay out late. They think I'm snotty because I'm careful in choosing my friends. They call me uptight because I'm a college-bound honor student, and the boys can't seem to impress me. They just don't get it.

What I don't get, though, is how someone with my religious background could find herself in this type of situation. I understood that Christians can't be gay, and gay people can't be Christians. Regardless, I thought of Jay Miller. Involuntarily, thoughts of her would fill my mind. Thinking about her was like drifting toward a strong ocean current, and I wasn't sure I could swim. Just when I thought I could stay afloat, though, I locked eyes with her again.

Chapter Two

IT WAS ABOUT a week later. School was out and the hall was noisy. I was at my locker, sorting through my books. I peered over my shoulder and spotted her about forty feet away, approaching. There were two guys with her. Again, skater kids. I could tell they were skaters by the way they dressed. Some of them wore baggy jeans, others wore skinny jeans, but they all rocked skater shoes, and skater-brand hats and T's.

Jay was talking, and using her hands for emphasis. The guys were attentive. I could tell they weren't looking at her the same way guys look at me -like a piece of ass. Pardon my language, I don't know how else to say it. They had a lot of respect for her, like she was one of the guys.

Jay was wearing dirty skater shoes. I couldn't tell what color they were. Her pants were khaki colored cargos with a black studded belt. She was wearing a white wife-beater, with a black bra underneath. Her zip-up hoodie was half-way opened and she wore the same trucker cap. I didn't realize I was staring, until we made eye contact.

Jay paused mid-sentence. The guys looked at me too. I turned away quickly, embarrassed. She continued talking, as they went by.

The gaze in her eyes was curious. They were questioning. It looked as if she wanted to say something. I wanted to know what was up with her. Why was she being so weird? Or was it me? I mean, if I caught some girl staring at me in the hall, I might have a weird reaction too. The question was, why was I staring at her?

Why did I have to know what color her shoes were, or the size of her pants? Why did my eyes linger on her skin?

When she walked by, I sensed an invisible force between us, like gravity or magnetism.

"She's gay."

I jumped at the sound of the voice. Some sort of hypnotic trance must have come over me because when I turned, I saw Emo standing next to me. I didn't notice him at twelve inches away.

Emo was totally gay. He had the reputation of being out, and not caring what anyone said, or did. From what I heard, he'd gotten jumped by the senior guys once or twice. I didn't know what to make of him until I sat next to him in Sophomore English. I found he was a really rad guy. He had a lot of insight into the male species.

Emo had gorgeous black hair. I love how his eyebrows were always perfectly trimmed. He had no facial hair, and he always looked as if he'd just stepped out of GQ Magazine. In short, you could tell he was gay from a mile away. Some girls talked about turning him straight, but he truly wasn't interested.

I turned to him. "Who's gay?"

"Jay Miller, the girl you were staring at..."

My stomach dropped as I heard her name for the first time. Jay, I thought. What a cute name.

"Well, she's varsity basketball, skater, only kicks it with dudes. Girl, Jay's the most obvious lesbian in school." He turned to me. "You aren't so obvious. But I think you and Jay would make a cute couple."

My heart pounded within my chest like an inside-out bongo drum. Why would Emo assume I'm gay? "First of all, I wasn't staring at her. Second, I'm not gay." I shifted toward my locker. I grabbed a book and put it in my bag.

Emo laughed. "Stop it. My gaydar is 100% accurate, and it's beeping very rapidly right now, and don't tell me how hard it is to come out." He crossed his arms. "My dad beat my ass and kicked me out when I told him I was gay."

I zipped up my backpack. "Well, my dad's a pastor."

"Oh. I'm sorry." His eyes fell to the floor. "That might actually be worse." He started to walk away.

I threw my backpack over my shoulder. "Wait, wait, Emo. How did you know you were gay?" I closed and locked my locker.

Emo returned and clapped his hands once. "The first time I saw Meet Joe Black, my first Brad Pitt movie, I got really hard. No girl could ever turn me on like Brad. And in the locker room, oh my god. I have to change in the stalls because the guys would kick my ass if they saw it."

I covered my mouth with my hand. That was TMI. You know, too much information. "Okay, I don't have that problem."

We started to walk toward the exit. "That's because you're not a teenage boy with raging hormones," he said, "How do you feel about Jay?"

I looked over my shoulder to see if anyone was in ear shot. "She's cute."

"How often do you think about her?"

I blushed. "Constantly."

He let out a giggle. "Do you ever make eye contact with her?"

"Yes."

"Are you losing your mind trying to decide if you're gay or not?"

"Yes."

Emo came closer and lowered his voice. "Honey, you're gay. Contrary to ridiculous belief, it isn't a choice. The sooner you realize it, the easier your life will be. And, one more piece of advice. You can't live in the closet and still expect to be happy. Look at Kevin Green. Does he seem happy to you?"

"Wait, Kevin Green is gay?"

"Not only is he gay, girl, he's mine. That hottie you see walking the halls is not the real Kevin Green."

I shook my head. "No way."

Now, this is important. You'll see why later. I have to show you my first impression of Kevin Green.

IT WAS OUR first day of the school year, and I was in my psychology class. I walked in, sat in the second row, and watched the teacher scribble something on the board and turn to face the class.

"Find your seats quickly, students, or the class will begin without you." He folded his hands together and held them in front of his chest. The teacher was a very serious man. His bald head shined under the light. I had to bite back a giggle.

As soon as the bell sounded, he began. "Welcome students. My name is Mr. Brown and I'll be teaching Psychology 101. This is a college level course. However, you will not receive college credit upon its completion. I repeat, you will not receive college credit upon the completion of this course. However, as this is a college-preparatory class, you will be treated in such a way that will prepare you for college. That being said," Mr. Brown turned to his desk and picked up a stack of papers, "I'm handing out the course syllabus. The syllabus will read the course objective, expectations, due dates for homework and other assignments such as mid-term—" I felt a tap on my shoulder. I glanced over and saw Zach, a kid who went to my church. He handed me a folded note.

I took the note just as the syllabi were being handed out. I opened it behind my book.

Hey Katie! I'm so glad you're in this class. You and I will have some intellectual conversations regarding old schools of thought.

I covered my mouth with my hand, forcing the laugh back down. I picked up my pencil and scribbled. You're such a nerd, Zach.

We passed the note again, and he wrote: You are too.

I know. But I play it off better.

Haha. Pay attention.

I turned my attention back to the teacher as he was saying, "...to discuss your mid-term essay. It will be five pages long,

double spaced, and with a 12 point, Times New Roman font. The topic of discussion will be Sigmund Freud and his psychosexual stages."

"Psychosexual?" The voice came from the back of the class. I turned and saw him. Kevin's grey eyes were his best feature. All the girls drooled over his muscular body and real a-hole attitude, not to mention he was our star basketball player. But, I didn't think he was all that great. To me, Kevin was just a kid with nice eyes. "I'm psychosexual. Do I get extra credit for being psychosexual?"

The class laughed.

Mr. Brown cleared his throat. "That was very humorous, Mr. Green. Perhaps you would like to be our star-comedian in after-school detention."

"Sense of humor, Mr. Brown. All I'm guilty of is having a sense of humor. Please don't send me to detention."

"You'll send yourself to detention if you continue speaking out of turn."

I saw Kevin place his index finger and thumb to the corner of his mouth, and move them across his lips, as if zipping them shut. He closed his eyes and turned the corners of his mouth as if he was taking a crap, but smiling at the same time.

"As I was saying," Mr. Brown continued, "we will be studying Freud and turning in a five page essay..."

That was my first impression of Kevin Green. Check out my second.

CHANEL AND I were strolling through the hall. Heads turned, like usual. Chanel was completely aware of her celebrity-like status. Thus, she took fashion tips from the Kardashians, and her make-up was always perfect. As we passed by a group of rowdy boys, Kevin turned to us and started singing, "Shake that ass for me, shake that ass for me."

Chanel and I looked at each other and laughed. Chanel turned and hollered, "I would Kev, except I don't want no short-short man!"

We opened a door to leave and heard, "Oh, I understand! You can't handle the magic stick. I ain't mad!"

We left the building. "He's a little obnoxious," I said.

"A little?" Chanel chuckled. "He's a moron."

"You said it, not me."

She bit her bottom lip. "He's hot, though. Admit it, he's hot."

I TRIED TO process the idea that Kevin might be gay, but it

didn't make sense. There was nothing about him that suggested gay.

Emo placed his hands on his hips. "What, you don't believe me? Ask any of the five thousand girls he claims to have slept with. Cheyenne Ramos, Rachel O'Neil, Chanel Parker,"

"Chanel Parker?" I couldn't recall my best friend ever mentioning a date with Kevin Green. Wouldn't she have told me something like that?

Emo's hand did a swirling motion in the air. "The list goes on and on. They'll tell you he's never slept with them, or they were too drunk to know it didn't happen."

"Really?"

Emo rolled his eyes. "Fine, don't believe me, but you'll see. And when you do, don't say anything. The only reason I'm telling you this is because you're gay too."

Emo pulled out his cell phone. "Give me your number."

"555-9326."

"Okay, I'm texting you now. I wanna know what's going on with you and Jay. This is very exciting. I gotta go. Later."

Chapter Three

A WEEK HAD gone by, and the semester was ending. There were two weeks off for winter break, and we'd start the new semester. I spent most of the time in church, helping out here and there, and trying not to think about Jay. Dad was busy.

Christmas time is always insane for the clergy. They were getting ready to house an extra 3,000 people for the Christmas service. You know, for the CEO Christians. I don't say that in a bad way, either. Dad is always psyched about seeing how many people come to observe the birth of Christ. The challenge is to get them to come back the following Sunday.

On top of that, they were creating the program, props, rehearsals, etc. The Christmas service was of the highest priority, the highlight of the year, next to the Easter service. I didn't think I'd see Dad very much, let alone get the chance to talk to him.

I always understood my dad's job meant I had to share him with a few thousand people. I respected it, but sometimes I felt selfish and wanted him all to myself. He always made up for it though. In fact, my parents got me a really cool gift for Christmas. It was four tickets to see O, which is a Cirque du Soleil show on the strip. I took my small group.

In most churches, the congregation is broken up into groups of three to six. People are grouped according to age, gender, and/or station in life. The purpose of a small group is to stay connected and hold each other accountable to the Christian standard. There were four girls in my small group.

PEOPLE WERE STILL filing into the theatre. The main lights were dimmed, but there were blue and red low-lights. Most of the audience was made up of adults, some old and some young, but most were drinking alcohol. Remember we're in Las Vegas, the land of free booze and no open-container laws.

Wendy sat beside me. She was the leader of our group. "These seats are amazing, Katie."

"Yeah," Janice agreed. She was two seats down. "Front and center. You're dad's so awesome."

I thought of dad. "I know."

Chanel approached and took the other seat next to me. If I hadn't known any better, I'd have thought she was sipping on a

cocktail. "This is so good." Chanel held up the glass.

"Uh," Janice leaned over. "Is that alcoholic?"

Chanel nodded. "Yeah, well. This guy bought it for me. It's not like I asked him to. And anyway, Jesus drank wine, remember?"

I exchanged glances with Wendy. Her eyebrows were up. "Um, Chanel?" She asked.

"What's up?"

Wendy pressed her lips together. "Just don't drink anymore of those, okay? We're still on a church outing."

Chanel said, "Ok. Anyone wanna try it?"

"Yeah," Janice reached for the glass.

"It's a Cosmopolitan." Chanel handed the drink over.

Wendy and I exchanged glances. Just let them, she said with her eyes.

I was a little curious about alcohol, but there was no way I was actually going to drink any. I didn't need to drink to have fun. Besides, my parents would kill me if I did.

The lights dimmed a little more, and a spot light was casted on a clown in the center aisle. He was carrying an umbrella, and it was raining just over it. It looked as if he was crying. Another little clown came from behind him and started chasing him around the theatre. Everyone laughed.

I glanced at my watch. There were ten more minutes until show time.

By the way, I love theatre. That's an understatement. There's no greater thrill than to be in the audience of an exceptional show. My heart always gets light, and I can't ever stop smiling. Theatre is my passion.

You get the picture. Let's skip to the part where I go back to school. I wouldn't admit it to myself at the time but I couldn't wait to see Jay Miller again.

Chapter Four

I WAS SITTING on a bench in front of my locker, emptying my gym bag. I was uber excited about getting half naked in a public setting. LOL. No, I wasn't. Feeling self-conscious, I glanced over my shoulder. There she was. I noticed Jay out of the corner of my eye. I needed a double-take to make sure. Yup, it was her. Jay was a few lockers down. She was sitting at a bench and going through her locker.

Jay was so beautiful. The butterflies were having a party in my stomach. I knew she was changing her clothes, and so I kept my attention in my locker, refusing to allow my eyes to wander. Don't look at her, I kept thinking. Just stay focused.

What was wrong with me? Why did this girl have such an effect on me? I didn't even know her. I'd never spoken to her, and yet everything about her appealed to me. Her thick black hair falling perfectly onto her face, curling slightly below her jaw line. It wasn't a boys cut, but it wasn't a girls cut either. In fact, everything about her style was unisex. She was so pretty. Her light brown eyes were hypnotizing. The way she walked, talked, and laughed. I liked everything about her.

It didn't make sense though. I wasn't gay. Yet, if I wasn't gay, why could I not stop thinking about her? Straight girls didn't feel like this, did they? I had to stop thinking. I was a nervous wreck. I was determined to get changed and out to the gym floor, like a normal person.

When I entered the gym, Jay was standing under the basketball hoop. The class was forming in front of her. Was she leading the stretches?

Jay wore boy's gym shorts. I thought it was cute. She was like a boy, but prettier. She was a pretty boy. It was cute. Although different, she was confident and comfortable with herself.

Jay looked up and we made eye-contact. I looked away. Oh my god. She'd caught me looking, again! My heart started pounding in my chest. I couldn't deny it anymore. It was more than evident. It was obvious. I was attracted to a girl.

I wanted to cry. How could I have been gay? How could this have been happening? It was Jay's fault. It was her fault for being so gorgeous. I'd never wanted anything as much I wanted to talk to her, alone. My thoughts were running at 100 mph, but abruptly, they slammed into a brick wall.

Homosexuality is immoral.

I was never a fake Christian. I didn't go around trying to hide my sins or justify them. I genuinely loved God. If it weren't for my code of ethic, I would probably have been in a bad place. I would've been lost without a clue. God, I'm sorry. I don't know what's happening. Please help?

That was it. I'd found the answer. My allegiance was to Jesus Christ, and therefore, I would stay far, far away from the girl with the boy's gym shorts. Simple right?

I tried to stop looking at her. I decided each time I felt the urge to look at her, I would look down at my watch. It worked for most of the period. After the warm up laps, we broke into groups of four and practiced passing the basketball. That made it easier. It gave me something to focus on, other than not looking at Jay. After a few more exercises, the coach blew the whistle and shouted, "Cool down!"

Yes, victory. Gym was practically over. I had done well. I turned and saw she was walking toward me. I blinked. Someone shoot me.

"Hi." Jay stopped right in front of me. At this point, my heart was beating in rhythm to some maniacal rave song. You know, like Dance Dance Revolution on super advance mode. As Jay got closer, I noticed her cologne smelled like leather, match smoke, and jasmine. It made me want to bury my face in her chest.

When her eyes met mine, my stomach dropped. It was like being on a roller coaster doing a sideways twist. I felt like raising my hands in the air and screaming. Fear gripped me. There were no seat belts on this ride. Nothing about it was safe. I couldn't be gay. I faked a smile. "Hi."

"You weren't in Coach Wallace's class last semester. Why?" Jay looked down at her thumb, and started chewing on her nail.

I blinked "Oh, I missed a semester of gym last year, and so I'm making it up." I locked eyes with her, and looked at my watch. How stupid.

"Why'd you miss gym?" Jay's head was tilted slightly, as if trying to get a better look at my face.

I didn't want her to see my face. In fact, I wanted to run and hide under a bleacher somewhere. I felt stupid. At the same time, it was exciting. These feelings were new, and they felt good. Why was I so afraid? She was just a girl. I met her gaze with confidence and bit my lip. "I fractured my ankle playing volleyball." I stayed in her eyes a moment and watched her eyes light up with interest. I was giving her my sexy smile. Was I flirting with her?

I noticed Jay had tiny freckles on her face that you couldn't see unless you were close up. She looked down at her thumb. "You

play volleyball?" She started biting her nail again.

I hesitated a moment. "Just for fun, at church," I glanced at her reaction.

Jay turned away with a pained look on her face. I pretended not to notice. "Well," she turned back. "I see you around all the time and I noticed we always make eye-contact. So I thought I'd introduce myself."

Wow. Now that was a pick up line. It was honest, straightforward and confident.

She extended her hand. "Name's Jay."

I hesitated. For a moment I wanted to take her hand, tell her mine, and run with it. Standing there with her was exhilarating. I exhaled hard. I couldn't do it.

I frowned. "Look, I'm a Christian. I'm not gay." My heart sank as I said those words, and as she dropped her hand, I felt regret. I didn't want to reject her. I wanted to apologize.

Jay laughed, but I could tell it was a fake laugh. "Well, I'm agnostic, but I heard that Jesus is awesome."

I sighed in frustration. I knew I'd done the right thing and it killed me, slowly. But, I think she had taken it well. "Are you gay?"

Jay smirked, looked down and around the gym. "If I say yes, will you get to know me before you judge me?"

I was taken aback by her question. "Why do you assume I would judge you? Look who's judging who."

Jay laughed. "Okay, okay. Yes, I'm gay." Her laughter was adorable.

The sound of a whistle echoed throughout the gym. We turned to the coach. He shouted. "North, Miller, keep moving."

"Sure thing, coach," Jay hollered. We started jogging around the gym, side by side.

"Have you ever been with a guy before?" I asked.

"Nope. Never have, never will."

I loved the way she said that. Was she for real? "Then how do you know you're gay?"

"Have you ever been with a guy before?" She asked.

"No."

"How do you know you're straight?"

I thought for a moment. I don't know that I'm straight.

"I've never been with a girl before either, but I don't need to sleep with anyone to know who I am."

Jay was getting to me. I wanted to push her away and tell her to stop confusing me. At the same time, I wanted to give her my number, tell her she'd better call me, and find a novel to get lost into, just so I wouldn't be waiting. Andrew Talent writes the best mystery novels.

She turned to me. "Am I scaring you?"

I could feel her eyes on me. I nodded, "Yeah." In that moment I felt completely vulnerable, naked, at her mercy. I gave her the truth, and the truth was I was terrified.

The whistle blew twice. It meant for us to get into stretching formation. As I walked to the front of the gym, I turned to see if she was behind me. I felt her breath on my cheek.

"It's scary at first," Jay whispered. "But it gets easier once you accept yourself. That's the key, accepting you." She walked away, and to the front of the formation. She clapped her hands. "Cool down stretches, guys. Let's do this!"

Jay didn't realize what she'd just done to me. If she were a walking, talking temptation before, now she was a walking, talking temptation with beautiful eyes, an adorable laugh, and a charming personality. I couldn't tell if I was more excited or afraid.

Chapter Five

THE NEXT DAY, I saw Jay in the cafeteria. I realized that since I knew who she was, I would spot her whenever we were in the same place. Now that we'd met, she could talk to me at anytime, and vice versa. Just the thought of talking to her again thrilled me.

We locked eyes. Jay's face turned pink. I probably blushed too.

"What was that about?" Chanel whirled around. "Who were you looking at?"

I took a few deep breaths as I contemplated my next words. If I couldn't talk to my friends, who could I talk to?

I opened my carton of chocolate milk. "Chanel, have you ever had," I hesitated, "homosexual thoughts?"

Chanel was examining her slice of pizza, with a fork and knife in hand. "No." She didn't even look up.

I waited for her to look at me. "Really? Never?"

Chanel put the utensils down. "I'm not perverted, Katie." Finally, she looked into my eyes. "I don't have perverted thoughts. Why, do you?"

I exhaled a hard breath. Was I insulted? "I'm not perverted, Chanel. I'm just asking if you've ever thought about it."

She shook her head, as if she couldn't believe we were having this conversation. "Have you ever thought about molesting a child?"

"What? No!" I turned away. How could she ask me a question like that?

"My point exactly, can we please talk about something that isn't disgusting? I'm about to eat." She picked up her fork and finished her meal. We didn't talk much for the rest of the day.

I always believed homosexuality was perverse, but is it really fair to categorize it with pedophilia? Everyone has homosexual thoughts. I was standing on it. How many people fantasize about, oh god, I'm not going to say it. If I was perverted for thinking this girl was obviously cute, fine, call me perverted. But don't ever mistake me for a pedophile. And really, just look at her, anyone who denied that Jay Miller was absolutely gorgeous, was a liar.

I had just decided. I didn't want to be gay. Emo said it isn't a choice. Ha. I was going to choose to be straight. There. I had just chosen. No more Jay. I didn't have a problem finding a guy. There was a cute guy right there in front of me. See, totally heterosexual.

Who was I fooling?

God, I really need your help. I'm losing my mind. I know you're disappointed in me. I really am trying. I don't want to be gay. I don't want to have to live a life where I have to hide things, especially from Dad. I know your word says it's wrong. Please, just tell me what to do. I will obey you, but I need some guidance.

That was it. I'd given it to God. The only thing I had to do now was go about my life, and wait for everything to work out. Yet, I couldn't stop thinking about Jay Miller. I couldn't think of anything but Jay Miller. It was frustrating. PSATs were coming up and I needed to focus on getting the highest possible score.

MY AWESOME FATHER came into the kitchen. I was sitting at the table staring at my math book. The house was quiet, and the smell of jasmine faintly lingered in the air. The perfect setting for studying.

Pastor Phil, my dad, was this tall bald guy with an everlasting supply of khaki pants. He always wore them. He was way taller than any human should be. Thank God my mom's a short Mexican or I would've been a giant, too.

"Hey, sweetie, you studying?"

I sat up straight and picked up my pencil as I heard his voice. "Yeah. Trying to."

"Tired? Need a pick me up?" He went into the pantry. "I'm making a pot of coffee."

I glanced at my watch. "Sure Dad, why are you home so early?"

Dad started to prepare the coffee machine. "I've been thinking about you and your mom, and I realize I've been spending too much time in church." He paused and looked at me. "I've been neglecting you, sweetie. I'm sorry." He took a seat at the table in front of me. "But that's all changed. I spoke to the elders, and they agree I should spend more time with my home family and less time with my church family."

It was good news. It had been so long since I got to really spend time with him. "That's great, Dad."

He folded his hands together. "Yeah, so tell me about O."

I recalled the Cirque du Soleil show I saw with my friends. "It was awesome." I put my pencil down and thought a moment. "I like how it portrayed everyday life in such a way that makes the simplest ideas, well, profound. We see these situations all the time, everywhere we go, but completely miss it because we're too busy worrying about something else."

"That's good art, sweetie. Good art makes you think. How is your theatre class?"

I bit my bottom lip. "I'm not in theatre, dad."

"Oh."

I knew he felt bad for not knowing. It's just he'd been busy, and he never asked before. "They wouldn't let me take it. I need another semester of gym, since I had to sit out last year. That was my only elective and I can't take theatre for only a semester. I'll take it next year."

"There's a good attitude. Any boys I should know about?"

My heart nearly jumped into my throat. I couldn't lie to my father, even if I tried. There was no way I could tell my dad about Jay. I told myself to breathe regularly. I didn't have to lie, and it wasn't a trick question. "No boys, Dad."

"I'm glad you have your priorities straight."

I sighed. Here we go again. "I know, school, church, and then personal relationships."

"Not including?"

"My relationship with Christ." This was protocol. It was annoying, but at the same time, I knew it meant he cared.

Dad stood and poured two cups of coffee. "When did you have quiet time last?"

I watched him. "Yesterday. Dad, I have quiet time every night."

"Why do you choose to have it at night?" He came with a green mug in each hand, placed one before me, and took his seat.

"Well, because I can talk to God about the events of the day, it's like a good wind down." I reached for the sugar on the centerpiece.

Dad sipped his coffee. "Good. I don't want you to change that. But consider this." He raised his pointer finger in the air. "At the end of the day, your mind is full. It's easy to talk to God, but not as easy to hear him. Try having quiet time in the morning, before school. Just sit there and invite God to speak to you. Then listen with your heart."

"Okay."

"There's something else on your mind."

My heart took off again, at the speed of light, I swear. "No." Great, just lied.

Dad put his mug down. "Are you sure?" He held out his arms, in a welcoming gesture. "I'm your pop. You can tell me anything."

"Dad, why don't you take Mom out for dinner? I think she might need it."

He looked up in thought, and returned his eyes to me. "That's a great idea. Where do you think?"

"I know she likes that Greek Isles place."

"Hmm... and you're..."

"I'm okay, Dad. I've got lots of pizza rolls. I think I'm gonna be up all night studying anyway."

He stood, "There's my tiger," patted me on the head. "You're going to kill those PSATs," He picked up his mug and walked away. "I love you, kiddo."

"Love you too, Dad."

Notice how my dad is so great? How we had an awesome relationship? If I were gay, this would fall apart. My dad is the closest person to me. No girl, I don't care how cute she is, will ever be worth losing my dad. It comes back to choice. I may not be able to choose my feelings, but I can choose my actions.

I WAS IN gym class when Jay approached me. We were getting into stretching formation. "Hey, Katie, guess what?"

I ignored her. I didn't even look at her. I felt my heart was made of stone. It had to be. How else could I be so cruel?

Jay tried to study my face. "What's wrong? Did somebody piss you off?"

I bent over to tie my shoe, although they were both tied.

"Okay, I guess you don't wanna talk, so I'll just leave you alone."

I stood up. "Jay, look at me. I'm not gay. I don't wanna be gay. I'm sorry you think I'm gay, but you're wrong. Please, please, don't ruin my life."

As soon as I heard my own words, I wanted to take them back. I didn't have to say it like that, in such a cruel way. I was just frustrated.

Jay's mouth opened slightly. She staggered away.

The class broke up into teams of three. The whole time, I had a hard lump in my throat. I knew I hurt her. I hurt myself, too. So there we were, two people who had been hurt, in the same place, at the same time, not speaking to each other.

We started playing three on three. I didn't want to play at all. I'd much rather have been alone in my room, beating my head against the wall.

"Man, what's your problem?" I moved to see who had spoken. It was Tyson, one of the guys on another team, sitting on the gym floor, yelling at, who?

"Can't take the heat, get your ass out the kitchen." It was Jay.

The whistle blew.

Tyson stood up, looking pissed. He took a step toward her. "This ain't street ball, you f'ing dyke!"

Jay laughed. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't know you were such a wuss."

Coach Wallace stepped in. "Hey! What's the problem?"

Tyson pointed to Jay. "She elbowed me in the chest, coach."

Coach shouted at Jay. "Miller!"

"Coach, I'm sorry." Jay raised her hands, as if in innocence. "I thought it was okay to play rough. I'll be more fragile with him."

"Miller, I expect you to play nicely." Coach said, "Switch teams with James."

Jay jogged over to my team.

Coach turned to Tyson. "Tyson, relax. She won't kill you, it's just a game."

A few of the guys laughed. "Oh!"

"He got punked!"

Jay looked at the six of us. "Who's on my team?"

"Me and Katie," Mendez said. He was this short Mexican dude. Mendez was cool.

Jay looked down for a moment, back up at me. "Let's play ball."

Mendez passed the ball to Jay. "Check it."

I wanted to be a good sport, so I decided to put a real effort into the game. I tried to get open. Jay checked the ball, looked at me, at Mendez, back at me, she yelled "Mendez!" The ball came at me. Catch it, catch it. Yes.

"Behind you," I turned and Jay was there. I passed it. She took a shot. She made it.

I never had fun playing basketball before. Jay made it easy. We made a good team. I found that physical activity shuts off the analytical mind. I was beginning to appreciate it.

After the game, I looked at her, but we didn't make eye-contact, which was a blow to the stomach.

I thought things would be easier if I pushed her away. It wasn't. I was still thinking of her 24/7. I was still stressed out about being gay/not being gay. On top of that, there was a gaping hole in my heart, expanding by the moment. I knew I hurt her, and I couldn't take it back. If I had done the right thing, why did I feel so horrible?

I WAS ON my way home from school. I figured I could use a good walk, just to clear my head. I called the only gay person I knew.

Emo screamed through the phone. "You did what?"

"I told her I wasn't gay and not to ruin my life."

He took a breath in, like he was shocked. "Oh my god. Poor Jay-jay. You're so mean, Katie."

I looked down and kicked a rock. "What should I do?"

“Uh, hello, you apologize. Tell her you’re a dumbass. Tell her you’re just scared and freaking out. It’s true.”

I looked over my shoulder. “But Emo, I really don’t wanna be gay. I can’t. I’m a Christian. My dad’s a pastor. This just isn’t working for me.”

Emo was silent a moment. “Okay, sweetheart. You go and figure out how to not be gay. Good luck with that.” Click.

I had just insulted him, hadn’t I? Ah! He was the only person I could talk to. I didn’t mean to offend either of them. They just didn’t understand. It might have been okay for them to be gay, but not me. I couldn’t live the gay lifestyle. I wouldn’t.

Chapter Six

I DECIDED TO surround myself with my friends from church. Maybe I'd come out to someone, and I could get Christian counseling. We met at Wendy's house. The four of us sat around her living room in front of the gas fireplace. The fire was cozy and inviting. The smell of chocolate and roasted marsh mellow filled the room.

Wendy pulled out a notebook from her backpack. "Okay, so, y'all probably don't wanna talk about this, but I promised Pastor Jed we'd go over it." Wendy was spiritually mature. She was a senior, two years older than me. I looked up to her.

"What is it?" I asked.

"The subject of purity."

Chanel groaned and shifted in her seat. "Okay, seriously. Let's take off our Christian masks. I'm not down with waiting till I'm married to have sex. No guy will go for that. I mean, who's pure anyway?"

"I am." I said.

"Me too," Wendy raised her hand.

"Well," Janice said. "I lost my virginity two months ago." Janice sat by the fire, with a marsh mellow at the end of a stick.

"I can't believe you didn't tell us!" Chanel said.

Janice glanced over. "You never told us when you lost it."

"Who did you lose it to?" Wendy asked.

Janice moved toward the fire and twirled her stick into the flames, "Doesn't matter. He turned out to be a jerk."

"Do you regret it?" I asked.

"Um. Yes and no." Janice turned back to us. "I mean, I really wish it were more special, but I agree with Chanel. Purity is over the top." Janice pulled the stick out of the fire and touched the marsh mellow. "I try hard to be like Jesus. I'm nice to everyone. I forgive people. And I'm generous. I even pray for my stupid enemies. I'm just being real. Purity is too much to ask."

Wendy turned to me. "How do you feel about purity?"

"Well," I fidgeted with my hands. "First I wanna say to Janice, I think you're doing well in your walk. We're at different places in our spiritual lives, and I think as long as we're doing our best, and we aren't idle, God is pleased with us."

"Purity is important to me because, well, it makes sense. I wanna get into a good college. If I have a baby, my dream is down

the toilet. Sex might distract me from school. Plus, there's STDs. I figure as long as I have my virginity, I won't even know what I'm missing."

Janice said "That's good, Katie. I respect you for that."

"I think it's unrealistic," Chanel said. "You'll lose your virginity by senior year."

"Well," Wendy said, "I'm glad y'all are being honest. That means a lot to the rest of us. We wouldn't be able to function as a small group without honesty."

"As for me, I maintain purity because I feel the Holy Spirit inside of me, all the time. I feel it nudging me. I feel it guiding me. I accredit all my goodness to the Holy Spirit living in me. If I were to start having sex, I think that strong feeling would fade away. And like Katie said, if I stay a virgin, I won't know what I'm missing."

"Kudos," Chanel said.

"Thanks."

Chanel shifted in her seat again. "Yeah, but didn't Jesus say that if you look at someone with lust, that's committing adultery? I do that every day."

I contemplated Chanel's statement. After a long moment of silence, I said. "I think what Jesus meant was that the action of the sin is less significant than the root of the sin. If we got our heads out of the gutter and filled our mind with positivity than we'd see each other as people, not sex objects."

"I like that," Janice said.

"Sex is positive." Chanel went on. "Didn't God invent sex for our pleasure?"

"Yeah," Janice said, "but intended between a man and a woman in the sanctity of marriage. All other sexual acts are considered sin."

Without thinking, I opened my mouth. "Including homosexuality." I closed my eyes. There, I had said it. Now we'd have to talk about it.

Chanel sat up. "Katie, that's the second time you've mentioned this gay thing. What's up with that?"

I leaned in. Fear crept up into my throat, like bile. I had to tell them. They were my friends, my family. "I trust you guys enough to tell you this. I really need to talk to someone about it." I hesitated a moment. "I'm struggling with same-sex attraction."

"Wow." Chanel shook her head. "It's that Jay chick isn't it? Everyone knows she's gay."

"Do you watch lesbian porn?" Janice asked.

"No," I replied. "How is that relevant?"

"Have you ever watched two girls make out?" Janice asked.

"No."

"Did you kiss Jay Miller?" Chanel asked.

"No."

"Katie," Wendy said, "this is definitely something to pray about. But remember homosexuality is just like any other sin. It isn't worse than, well, premarital sex."

"I'm not having sex," I said.

"Yeah, but you want to," Chanel said.

"No, I don't. Didn't you just hear me say purity is important to me?"

Janice squinted one eye. "Yeah, but whether you intend on having sex with her or not, the attraction is the root of the sin. It's demonic. Does your dad know about this?"

"No!" I jumped up on my feet. "I'll kill you guys if you tell anyone! I confided in you, you better not betray my trust."

"Don't worry, Katie," Janice said. "We won't."

"Stay away from her," Chanel said. "Don't talk to her at all."

I took my seat on the couch, and leaned over my knees and placed my head in my hands. "I'm doing that, but it's killing me. I feel so bad about hurting her." I sat up and regarded my friends. "Plus, I can't get her out of my head. I can't think straight anymore."

Wendy got up and sat beside me. She put her hand on my shoulder. "If Jay really cares about you, she would understand you're a Christian, and you can't live that lifestyle."

"This isn't about her." I replied. "It's about me. I'm a train wreck." I leaned toward my knees again, with my head in my hands. "This is so hard, you guys. I feel consumed by it."

Wendy reached for my hand. "We're gonna pray right now." We silently bowed our heads, as Wendy led the prayer.

"Heavenly Father, we bless your name. We thank you for the gift of community. We thank you that we have each other to turn to in difficult times. We thank you for hearing our prayers. We wanna lift up Katie to you. You know her struggle, and you know her heart. I pray that you deliver her from her struggle. We know you wouldn't allow us to be tempted beyond what we can handle. Give her the strength and the courage to do what's right. Guide her. Protect her. Love her. We thank you. We love you. In Jesus' name, Amen."

Prayer works. I believe the power of our prayer is directly proportional to the magnitude of our faith. If there's no faith, there can be no miracle. In this case, I didn't want to be a doubting Thomas, but that was weak. It's not that I didn't believe in miracles. Sometimes something in the air just feels right, and a prayer feels powerful, and I can put my faith in to it. But, I didn't feel any power. It left me hopeless. I was running out of people to turn to. In fact, there was no one else, no one but Jay.

Chapter Seven

IT WAS A Sunday morning. I was on the church campus, which is pretty huge. The sanctuary was the only building that actually looked like a church. There was the auditorium where we held concerts and the Christmas/Easter services. There was a bookstore in the learning center, where we held self-help classes for adults. There was a café. There was a playground and a gym. Then, of course, there was the youth warehouse where all the awesome things happened. I loved it there. One Love Church was my home.

I was sitting inside the café. Only a few people were in the room, talking and drinking coffee. I was skimming the concordance of my Bible. I had never studied the scriptures that condemned homosexuality before. I didn't even know where they were found. Some Christian I was. As I lost myself in my thoughts, Zach took a seat in front of me.

He wore an excited smile. "Was Freud a mad man or what?"

I folded the corner of a page and closed my book. Although Dad may have been too busy for these interesting conversations, at least I had Zach. I thought a moment. "I actually think he was brilliant. Psychoanalysis changed everything we know about the mind."

"Yes, but on what basis? The Oedipus complex? It's absurd to think children are sexually attracted to their parents."

I nodded. "It's definitely a radical idea. But all the more reason to give it fair consideration."

Zach's eyes roamed the room. "Okay, let's consider it. I have been sexually attracted to my mother, and therefore derived sexual pleasure from being breast fed. Now I'm developed, so I look to other women and want to suck on their boobs?"

I laughed. "It sounds simple, doesn't it? A child's sexual organs may not be fully developed but it doesn't mean they don't feel anything. And it's completely innocent. Such feelings are natural between a mother and child."

Zach shook his head. "It seems wrong, Katie. God made sexual pleasure for married people, not kids. It's sick."

I let out a long breath. "Zach, you're taking it the wrong way. It isn't erotic. To a child, it's just something that feels natural. To a mother, it's just the way of nurture."

Zach looked disappointed with my response. "So you agree with Freud, then?"

I thought for a moment. "Um, I can't say I agree with him. I haven't heard any other arguments, or formed one myself. If you disagree with him, why not form your own argument?"

"Maybe I will."

There were a few moments of comfortable silence.

"So, what were you studying?" He asked.

"Oh, um." I bit my lip, debating if I should tell him. "Homosexuality. I know it's wrong, but I've never actually taken a look at the scriptures."

Zach pressed his lips together. "The scriptures are pretty clear. Paul described it as unnatural. Moses called it an abomination. Read the first chapter of Romans, and the first chapter of 1st Corinthians."

I turned away as my heart winced at those words. Unnatural. Abomination. God, why do you hate me?

Zach leaned forward. "What's your curiosity?"

I chuckled. "Ah, I don't know. I guess I just don't see what the big deal is. Gay people don't hurt anyone by being gay."

His eyebrows scrunched up. "They hurt themselves. It's a violation against nature."

I was getting upset, and part of me wanted to halt the conversation right there. But, I was curious as what he had to say. "How is it a violation against nature? I read that some animals are gay."

Zach's eyes narrowed on me. "Sex is for procreation. Gay people can't procreate. Gay animals can't procreate."

"Maybe they weren't meant to."

He pressed his lips together again. "Katie, God said to multiply and fill the earth."

"Zach, the earth's pretty full."

He raised his voice. "So what? God doesn't change."

"Yeah, but we do."

Zach leaned forward, placing his elbows on the table. "What are you getting at, Katie?"

I looked away. "Nothing."

"Homosexuals will not inherit the Kingdom of God. Don't forget that." He drummed his fingers after a few silent moments. "See you later," and he left.

I picked up my Bible and left the café also. I couldn't believe the way Zach's attitude completely shifted once I mentioned homosexuality. I could tell he was disgusted. As I walked out of the café, I bumped into Wendy.

"There you are, Katie." Wendy pulled me into a hug. "I wanted to see how you were doing. You know, with the same-sex problem and all. I've been praying an awful lot."

I nearly dropped my Bible. She made it sound as if I was a meth addict. "I'm doing okay."

"Okay, good. Now remember if you ever feel like you're about to give in to temptation, you give me a call. I'm serious. I intend to help you through this."

My head rotated from the sound of her voice. My body followed. They taught us in church that a sin was a sin, meaning all sins were equally bad. Wendy even said it during the last group. Yet, there she was, treating my "problem" like some nuclear radiation, which needed immediate containment. I wondered if she were confronting Janice and Chanel about their sexual activities.

I glared at our shadows on the concrete. Even they were strangers now. "Thanks for your help, Wendy." I looked over my shoulder for an excuse to walk away. I saw my mom talking to a pair of women. "Oh, I have to talk to my mom. See you later."

Wendy's hand rested on my shoulder. "You'll get through this, Katie. I know you will."

Her hand fell from my body as I walked away. I kept my eyes on my mother, trying to decide what I'd say to her. The women halted their conversation as I approached.

"Well, lookie here," a brunette said, beaming at me. "I think we're looking at the next Pastor North. Of course, your name will change when you get older. I wish I could save you for my son."

My mom laughed. Note: I absolutely adore my mom. When I was a kid, I used to watch as she brushed her long black hair in the mirror. She was beautiful, and I thanked her for the good genes. Especially her deep dimples. "But this is America, and Katie has a choice," she said.

"Oh, I know she has a choice." The woman said, "I just think my son would be a great choice." The woman winked at me.

I wanted to be polite so I faked a smile, and hoped it looked real. It's amazing how adults think they can pick out their kid's future, the same way they picked out a crib and stroller.

"But I do think Katie will be a pastor." Mom placed her hand on my shoulder. She started touching my hair the way she used to when I was a kid. "She's a lot like her dad."

I chuckled and turned around to my mom. "Anyway, I just wanted to ask if I can take the bus home. I don't feel very well." It was the truth.

Mom frowned. "Did you hear Dad's sermon yet?"

"Yes. I went to the 10:00."

"Okay. But I'll drive you."

The brunette woman touched my shoulder. "We'll pray for you, Katie."

"Thank you."

Mom and I went to the car. A few minutes later she was behind the wheel on a busy street. "What's wrong?"

I stared out the window and watched the passing view. It felt as if my heart was being drained of its blood. My head was getting light and dizzy. I felt I might have passed out right there, if I moved. I recalled the conversations I had with my group, and with Zach and Wendy. I remembered the comments Chanel made in the cafeteria. I had never felt so distant from my friends before. I didn't feel like I could be myself. I wondered who I really was. For the first time in my life, I didn't feel like I belonged in church.

"Mom, do you ever wonder who your real friends are?"

My mother took a deep breath and pulled over on the side of the road. She shifted to park and removed her seat belt. Mom fixed her gaze on me. "Yes, *mija*. It's hard to tell who your friends are when you're young. Before you learn who are your real friends, you have to learn who are not your real friends. That's a hard lesson. I can only tell you this. True friends don't stab each other in the back. They stab each other in the front."

"Huh? I thought true friends don't stab each other at all."

"Everyone stabs each other. It's part of our sinful nature. You'll understand, *mija*. One day." Mom touched my chin. "I'm proud of you."

I relaxed in my seat and contemplated her words. "Thanks, Mom."

Mom didn't really clear anything up. I knew I needed new friends, so I called Emo.

I WAS LYING in my bed, staring up at the ceiling with the phone to my ear. The ringer on Emo's phone was a song. I sang along in my head.

"Hello?"

"Hey, it's Katie."

"Hello, I saved your number. I know it's you." Emo was sarcastic, but he didn't sound angry.

"I wanted to apologize. I know I insulted you."

There was a moment of silence. "You mean you didn't figure out how to not be gay?"

"Uh," I wasn't sure what to say, when he started laughing.

"Katie, it's all good. I know how you feel. Being gay is hard and complicated. It would be so much easier if you were straight, right?"

I rolled over on my belly, and reached below the bed for my journal. "Basically." I brought the book and pen onto the mattress, opened it, and started to doodle.

Emo went on. "You're gonna go through this phase where you hate your life and you make yourself at home in your cozy little closet. Then when your friends find out, you find out who your friends are. When your family finds out, that's the hardest part. But then you decide you don't care what people think. Then, finally, you can be happy."

I doodled Chanel's name in block letters. "I don't wanna go through any of that. My friends suck, Emo. It's like, we were so cool before, but once I told them, they treated me different. They say it's just like any other sin, but now they act like I have the plague or something."

"They're Christians, what do you expect?"

"I don't know."

Emo sighed. "Katie, I'll be your friend. Our lovers are basketball players. We can go to the games together, and the mall, and, do you play Dance Dance Revolution? Because I'm the champ and I need some real competition."

"I haven't apologized to Jay yet."

"Omigod. Will you hurry before her poor little heart breaks more?"

I started to write, "Jay Miller," in cursive. "Is Jay her real name?"

"I don't know. It sounds kind of butch, so I'm guessing her real name starts with J."

"She's so cute, Emo. I really wanna get to know her."

"Well, you better go get her. You're not the only lesbian who likes Jay Miller. Oh, my future husband's calling. I gotta go, girl. Call me later. I expect you to make up with Jay, young lady, and treat her better. Okay?"

I laughed. "I'll call you later, Emo."

A FEW DAYS went by, and my heartache continued. I thought about apologizing to Jay, but first I had to make sure it was the right thing. I saw her every other day in gym, but she never looked at me. I tried so hard to keep my eyes from her, yet despite my best efforts, I sometimes couldn't help but glance in her direction. In those moments, her eyes never met mine. It killed me.

What got me the most was the knowledge that every moment that passed, that I didn't run to her with an apology, was a moment she was drifting further and further from me. My desire for her was unbearable. I couldn't stand the idea of her getting with some other girl. Jay Miller should have been mine.

I wondered what it would be like just to go on one date with her. I wondered what kind of jokes she'd tell. I wondered what

kinds of movies she liked, or how many siblings she had. I had heard girls were better kissers than guys were. I wondered if it were true.

It was important to me. I needed to explore my sexuality. How was I supposed to find out whether I was gay or not if I didn't explore the possibility? Chanel and Janice were sexually active, and no one was getting worked up about it. Technically, if I dated Jay, it wouldn't be a sin unless the sexual act took place, right? I didn't intend on sleeping with her. I did want to kiss her. Was that a sin? And if it was, it wasn't any worse than premarital sex.

I couldn't take it anymore. It wasn't healthy. I knew I was rationalizing, but I thought I could afford to make a mistake, if indeed it was a mistake. Since when did Jesus expect me to hurt another's feelings? Even if being gay is wrong, hurting the other person was never what Jesus had in mind. I knew that for sure. What would Jesus have done? He would have been honest. He would've been a friend. I decided to apologize to Jay.

Chapter Eight

JAY WAS GATHERING a few basketballs and putting them in this big netted thing on wheels. Gym class was over, everyone went to the locker rooms, and it just dawned on me that Jay was the coach's assistant.

My hands shook as I approached her. Her back was turned to me. "I'm sorry, Jay."

She turned around. "For what?"

"I'm sorry for what I said last week."

Jay's expression was bright and optimistic. "There's no need for an apology. You were honest about your feelings. I respect that." Her eyes met mine.

Upon eye contact, I was rendered powerless. It felt like a vacuum threatening to suck me in and take me to a place where I had no control, no gravity, no way to hold myself onto the earth. Could this have been love? I couldn't afford to find out.

"That isn't true." I said. "I wasn't honest. Do you think we can talk later, like just me and you?"

Jay laughed. "Like in a place where no one is in earshot?"

"Yeah, I guess."

Jay started to wheel the big netted thing away. "I'm not busy after school."

"That's perfect."

She shouted. "Meet me at the park around the block."

I closed my eyes as a whirlwind of both excitement and fear blew through me. I wasn't sure what I was going to tell her. I knew I had to tell the truth, or at least part of it.

I SPOTTED JAY sitting on a picnic table across the park. A cold breeze blew my hair in my face. I shoved my hands in the pockets of my jacket. I get extra sensitive to the cold when I'm nervous.

Jay was sitting on top of the table, with her feet on the seats. One hand was on her knee, and with the other she lifted her hat and replaced it off to the side. It looked like she was carving something into the wooden table.

I took a deep breath. She's just a girl. I went to her.

As I got closer, Jay noticed me. She watched as I came nearer. With every step I took, I got weaker and weaker. With every breath, I felt every resistance fall. I was undressing my heart, removing

layers I never knew I had. My hands were trembling, my bones shaking. My heart was like a crack addict, feigning with a passion for its next fix. It was so new, so scary, and still, so exciting.

I didn't know Jay's intentions with me. It didn't matter. I had never fallen in love before, yet I imagined this is how it would feel. I felt open, like she could ask me anything and I would tell her the truth without thinking. I could trust her with everything, my secrets, my wishes, and yes, my heart.

Whether Jay knew it or not, she had my heart by the teeth. One twitch of her jaw, and I would be ruined. Yet it was okay. More than okay, it was good. It felt so right, just standing there in front of her. Nothing else mattered.

I stepped toward her, one foot in front of the other. Her eyes told me it was okay. I was getting closer. Sixteen inches, twelve inches, in her personal space now, six inches, and two inches. I leaned in toward her ear, like I was going to whisper something, but instead I paused to inhale the scent of her hair. I leaned my head on her shoulder, and from somewhere inside me, heaviness came up through my chest, and toward my head. I broke down and cried.

Jay wrapped her arms around me. I felt one hand squeezing my shoulder, and the other caressing my back. Her hands felt like home. They were strong, yet light.

Why was I crying? I wasn't sad a moment ago. Looking back, I can see I was scared, frustrated, angry and sad at the same time. I didn't even realize those emotions were there. It's like after you skip a meal or two, and don't realize you're famished until you start eating. In Jay's presence, I felt my heart, and with it, everything else.

I stayed in her arms for another moment. When I pulled away I was suddenly aware that my mascara was probably all over the place. I wiped underneath my eyes with my fingers. "Wow. I'm sorry. I didn't plan for that to happen."

Jay touched my face, and stared into my eyes for a moment. "Katie, stop apologizing. Everything's cool."

I breathed deeply. She was right. I looked down at her hands. I touched them. Her nails were bitten off. There was some black nail polish. It looked like it was peeling over the last few days. On her right hand, there was a scar, about half an inch long. "What's this?"

"That's a burn." She laughed. "A firecracker went off in my hand last 4th of July. My brother sneaked up on me, and lit it without me even knowing, lil' punk."

I let my fingers slide in between hers. I was surprised by how comfortable I felt. "Jay, what's your real name?"

She chuckled. "It's Jane. I don't like it."

"Why not? I like it. Jane Miller."

Jay was looking down at my hands, watching me touch hers. "Ah, come on." She looked up. "Jay sounds better and you know it."

"Maybe a little better. But Jane is a pretty name."

Jay moved to sit on the bench, straddling it. "Kate-Lynn."

I sat close to her. She moved in closer. "You know my real name." I'd never been this close before. God, it felt good.

"I've known it for a while."

"How?"

"I'm a psycho stalker." She laughed. "No, I'm not. I asked that red-headed kid who you were. He said you're Kate-Lynn North, the pastor's daughter."

I cast my eyes to the ground. Falling in love was not part of the plan. I was meant to apologize and explain why we could only be friends. However, it was way too good to ruin. "Let's not talk about my dad."

"What do you wanna talk about?"

I stared at her adorable face, her light brown eyes, the tiny freckles everywhere. "You. You're so cute."

Jay blushed. "Me? You're the one with the gorgeous smile. All the Varsity jocks talk about how hot you are, on a regular basis."

I covered my face, knowing I was blushing. "Wow. You really get the inside scoop, don't you?"

Jay shrugged. "The jocks don't like me much. But I hear it from the other guys, and they repeat what's said in the locker room."

I took her hand and started playing with it again. I touched her fingers, her knuckles, and her palm. "Why don't the jocks like you?"

"Because I kick ass in basketball, and they're afraid I might be better than them."

I laughed. "Yeah, you're pretty good."

It was silent. Jay opened my palm and caressed it with her thumb. The feeling was overwhelming. How is it that she could make my whole body quiver with just a stroke of her thumb? What was she doing to me?

I lost myself in her eyes. "Jay?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm scared." I squeezed her hand. "That's why I said what I said. I feel like the ground is shaking under my feet, and it's just scary."

"I know." Jay touched my face again. "I'm not going to hurt you."

I wasn't afraid of being hurt by her. I was afraid of accepting that I might be gay. How would it affect my life? Everyone who is

important to me is a Christian. They'd all be hurt by it, and they'd all hurt me for it. I looked around the park, and returned my eyes to hers. "My whole life is gonna change, isn't it? Everything is changing."

A few silent moments passed. "Yeah, but you're not alone. We all go through it. It's the struggle that bonds us as family."

I felt a little better, and I understood why gays call each other family. "Tell me what it was like for you."

Jay grinned. Her eyes roamed around the park. "Ever since I was a kid, I played with the boys and admired the girls. I remember asking my parents if I were a boy or a girl. Then I had my first period, my hormones went wild and I felt like a girl. I saw the boys weren't going through it. So I embraced my feminine side, but I started to regard girls in different way. I didn't fight it. I told myself if I'm gay, I'm gay."

"What about your parents?"

"They're laid back. They don't pressure me to figure out my future, or be anything I'm not. It's not that they don't care. It's just that they emphasize happiness. They say as long as I'm happy, and it doesn't hurt anyone, they're okay with it. If they pressure me, I might make decisions that may make me unhappy."

I lifted my eyebrows. That philosophy was so far from what I'd been taught, but it was respectable. It made sense in its own secular way. "Your parents are cool."

"Yeah. I love them."

"Have you ever had a girlfriend before?"

Jay looked down at her hands and bit her thumbnail. "Yeah."

The sting of jealousy was new to me. I've been jealous before, here and there about little things. But, it was never like this. To think of her with another girl was to seriously consider a limb amputation without anesthesia.

"Just one. I thought she was cool and I liked her, but she turned out to be immature. She was always starting drama, trying to get my attention, you know? I got tired of it."

I didn't want to hear about it, but I wanted to know more. "So you broke up with her?"

"Yeah."

It was obvious to me she was picking up on my jealousy. I think she may have liked it. "Well, I don't like thinking of you with other girls."

"Me neither." Jay bit her thumb nail. "What do you think of me with you?"

I blushed, and casually turned away. "This feels good, really good."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." I knew I was giving her the sexy smile, and I wanted to. I loved when her face turned pink. It reminded me that she liked me.

Jay held her hand out and peered up toward the sky. "Is it raining?"

I felt a drop on my arm, and on my head. "Yes." I glanced upward also. "I didn't even realize the sky was grey."

"It looks like it's about to pour. You wanna hang out at my place?"

A million thoughts bombarded me at once. Maybe I shouldn't. I wanted to play hard to get, but, I wanted even more to see her bedroom. "Okay."

We walked toward the parking lot and got into her hatchback. It was old and rusty, with different colors and primer on some areas. "This is my Rabbit. It's a classic. It needs work, I know. Me and my dad found it in a junk yard and made a project out of it."

"Wow. That's rad."

I got into the car. Jay drove to her house.

Jay lived in a gated community. There was a baby tree in the front yard, surrounded by grass. The cobblestone walkway led us to a pair of white French doors. There were a couple of lawn chairs on the porch, an end table, and a tin can filled with cigarette butts. Jay opened the door and I followed her in.

I was greeted by the voices of children and the sounds of a video game. After I passed through the natural-wood foyer, I entered the living room and noticed the furniture was contemporary, and the art on the walls were of good taste. I already liked Jay's parents. The room smelled like a pine scented air-freshener. I saw the kids sitting on gaming chairs.

"Hey, pineapple boy," Jay said. "What's up puka pants?" She turned to me. "That's Jacob and Jen. They're twins."

"Hey, weirdo!" The kids replied in unison.

I laughed. "Awesome."

Jacob gaped up at me for a moment, "Hi, Jay's girlfriend," and turned back to his game.

I blushed. It felt good to be called Jay's girlfriend. "Hey, Jacob."

Jay led me into a hall. "Her name is Katie."

"Hi, Katie," the girl called out.

"Hi, Jen."

The hall was dark and so I wasn't sure where I was going. I felt her fingers slide into my hand. Her touch sent tingles all through my body, and I stopped breathing. I closed my eyes. It was definitely a first. Breathe, Katie.

Light fell onto the floor as she opened a door. "This is my

room. It's kinda messy." She started to pick up some stuff, tossing them in the closet. She closed the door behind me.

They say you can tell a lot about a person by checking out their room. The gaming chair in front of a big TV told me that she loved video games, which probably meant she was adventurous. There was a full sized bed covered with clothes. She obviously wasn't a neat freak. Beside her bed, I noticed a footlocker covered with stickers and graffiti. They displayed some of her values. For instance, she was anti-censorship, pro-unions, a Tony Hawk fan, and definitely gay. The easel near the closet caught my eye.

"Do you paint?"

Jay smirked. "Yeah, actually. Nobody's ever really interested in my work, but." She opened her closet door and picked up a painting. "I call this Yellow Submarine, as tribute to The Beatles." It was shades of blue, violet, and white, in swirling motions. It resembled the wind. There was streak of red, and another of yellow, which came out of nowhere, but somehow, it was perfect. It was definitely abstract. I liked it.

"Hmm..." I pivoted my head sideways. "I like the way you blended the color here," I let my finger brush over a circular figure. "And the red here," I touched a different spot, "it makes me feel like, something different, something that fits because...it was made to fit, but doesn't really fit. Kinda like a jigsaw puzzle perfectly shoved into the wrong place."

Jay's face lit up. "Like a submarine? People have no business in the sea, or in space, or in the future. That's us humans, though. We perfectly fit in all the wrong places." She laughed.

I examined the painting. "Yellow submarine..." I let my thoughts linger as I placed the painting onto the easel.

Jay threw herself onto the bed. "What's your favorite color?"

I sat next to her. "I like blue."

"Why?"

I bit my lip. It was an interesting question. "I don't know. I've never asked myself why. What about you?"

"Red."

I leaned back. My head was close to her lap. "Why?"

She had a mischievous grin on her face, "Because it feels good when I look at it."

I felt a flush of pink rise to my face. That's how I feel about you.

Jay touched my hair. "What's your favorite thing in the whole world?"

Wow. Another excellent question. My nerves started to race. I felt that roller coaster sideways twist again. God, it felt good. "I love theatre. I love the drama, the music, the comedy. I love the

costumes and props. I love the mood in the theatre when everyone is anticipating a good show, the lights go down and it's just you. Everyone has put so much work into it, hours and days, weeks and months. When the lights are low, it feels like it was all for you."

"Nice."

I closed my eyes as her fingers went through my hair. "What's your favorite thing?"

She chuckled. "I'm not sure. I mean, I know I like playing ball, and I like art. I don't think I feel anything the way you feel theatre, though."

It was silent a moment.

"Tell me about your parents," I said.

"My dad's a carpenter. He works at City Center. They're supposed to be done by the end of this year."

I felt her fingers brush my cheek. I wanted her to kiss me. "Is that the new Casino by Monte Carlo?"

"Yeah. It's supposed to be a city within a city. I heard there was a gay tower, too." Jay's light brown eyes caught mine. I examined every little feature on her face. She was so pretty. I wanted her to kiss me.

"A gay tower?"

"That's what my dad said. It makes sense. Wherever gay people go, we wanna connect with other gay peeps and find out where the hot spots are. So why not stay in the gay tower? I heard they didn't put rebar in the concrete, though. So, the engineers made them stop building."

"What's rebar?"

Jay looked up in thought. "Oh, um... I think it's steel. Steel bars within the concrete, meant to reinforce it. Or it might be iron."

I chuckled. "The concrete is weak. That doesn't sound safe."

Jay shook her head. "It's not. Nothing about the construction industry is safe, though. Fourteen people already died on the job."

"Yeah, I heard. That's crazy." I rolled over on my belly. "What about your mom?"

"Oh, she's a social worker. She's works with pregnant teens. She helps them prepare for motherhood, with jobs and apartments. Helps them stay clean and stuff. She brings her work home a lot, and it stresses her out. Even when she's stressed out, though, she's happy."

I studied her facial expressions closely. "Are you happy?"

I could tell Jay was trying to hide her face with a pillow. I knew Jay was happy. "Yeah, I am, Katie. I've got everything I want and need." She revealed her bright smile. It was joyous, like an eight-year old girl meeting Justin Bieber for the first time. Except I was her teenage heart throb. God, she was beautiful. "My life is

good. Are you happy?"

"Yeah, I'm happy." I'd be happier if you kissed me already. I stared at her. "Jay, why am I attracted to you?"

Her face turned red. "Does it matter why?"

"Yes and no. I have feelings for you." My eyelids fell, and in the dark I thought. Did I really say that? I guessed playing hard to get was officially out the window. I opened my eyes and saw her leaning on her side, above me.

Jay pinned me down with her eyes. She touched my face with her hand.

I closed my eyes again. The nerve endings on my skin responded to her caresses. It felt like inhaling the scent of a flower, taking it in deeply, until the smell tingled on my skin. I opened my eyes and chose my words. "It feels natural, but it isn't logical. I need to understand why I feel this way."

Jay leaned forward. Her lips gently brushed along my jaw. Her warm breath on my neck gave me goosebumps. I stopped breathing again.

Her lips touched mine. She was teasing me. I wanted to scream, just kiss me. Finally, she did. When her mouth pressed onto mine, I felt her energy pour into me, and all through me. My lips parted, and I felt her tongue. Our mouths danced in a natural rhythm. My body had never responded that way before. It was as if Jay and I were physically in sync. I gently pushed her away.

We stared each other in the eyes. It felt as if I had dived into the life in her eyes and followed them down to the depths of her soul. Deep inside, Jay was playful and vulnerable, like a child. I knew because when I stared at her, those feelings arose within me. With every moment passed, it felt as if we were going deeper and deeper into each other. It felt so good, I nearly laughed out loud.

Jay really did laugh out loud. She pinned me onto the bed.

I tried to push her off but she was stronger than me. "Oh yeah?" I reached for the pillow beside me and threw it at her face. Jay let her body fall onto mine, and picked me up as she rolled over. Now, she was lying on her back, and I was lying on top of her. We were laughing the whole time. Our laughter faded into silence and we were staring at each other again. I couldn't get over how beautiful she was. She kissed me.

Jay wrapped one arm around me and rolled over again so I was on my back, and she above me. I'm not sure how long we were making out, but by the time the rain stopped, I realized I was expected at home. I was afraid.

Chapter Nine

I HAD NEVER kept a secret from my dad. Even when I did something wrong, I came clean and the discipline was reasonable. This was something else.

On the drive back home, I kept scrutinizing myself in the mirror. I fixed my hair, and dusted off my clothes. "I feel paranoid. Do I look gay?"

Jay glanced at me and laughed. "You look the same way you did this morning, but happier."

I watched myself in the mirror again. "Omigod."

"What?"

"I can't go home with this big smile on my face."

Jay's laughter filled the car. "Why not?"

"Dad's gonna ask me why I'm so happy."

Jay glanced at her rear view mirror and turned to me. "Tell him we smoked a blunt."

"Not funny."

"Katie, chill." The car rolled onto my street. "You can tell him the truth, just not the whole truth. Just tell him you had a good day."

My heart took off without me. The closer we got to my house, the more I realized I couldn't lie to my dad. "He's gonna wanna know about my day."

"Really? I didn't know parents still did that."

"Yeah, we're tight like that."

Jay scrunched up her eyebrows. "Okay, so there had to be something good that happened today that had nothing to do with us."

Wow. She said us. Are we an us? I hurried to think. "Oh, I got an A on my English paper."

"Sounds good."

I peeked at the mirror again. "That can't be it. A's don't make me this happy, and he knows it."

She laughed.

"This isn't right, Jay. I'm making up a lie out of the truth just to convince myself it isn't a lie."

"So, tell him the truth."

I pointed to my house, "On the right, here, with the white truck, and no. That's not an option."

"Why not? You said you're tight with him." Jay pulled up and shifted to park.

I faced her. "I am, but this is different. He would kill me. He

might kill you, too."

Jay's eyebrows went up. "What are you gonna do?"

I exhaled hard. "I'm just going to avoid the subject. It's not hard to steer dad away from any given conversation."

"Sounds good."

"Jay,"

"Yeah?"

"You won't tell anyone, right? Not even your guy friends?"

Jay shook her head. "I won't say anything until you're ready, promise." I could tell she was sincere. "But, I can't guarantee people won't guess. Don't stress about everyone else. Your parents are all we need to care about."

"Okay." I placed my hand on hers and hoped it would suffice for a goodbye embrace. "Bye."

"Bye beautiful."

Dad's car was in the driveway. I took a few deep breaths and walked through the front door.

I was greeted by the fragrances of Italian cooking. I heard my dad singing in the kitchen, "To be loved, to be loved, oh what a feeling, to be loved."

I laughed. It was perfect. My dad in dork-mode always made me happy, especially while he was wearing a pink chef hat.

I leaned over the kitchen counter to get a peek at what he was cooking. "Smells great, Dad."

He grinned at me. "Wait 'til you taste it."

Dad stirred a white sauce and lowered the heat. "I got it off Recipe.com. It's called Chicken Picatta, with sautéed mushrooms, fresh cilantro, and..." He opened the oven door. A marvelous smell arose. "I'm baking a cheese *ciaccino*." After he closed the door, he placed three fingers together and kissed them. "Mama mia, pizzeria, Chef Boyardia."

I giggled. God, I loved my dad. I was glad he cooked something so good. Otherwise, I may have skipped dinner entirely. "I better get ready for dinner. It looks like you're almost done there." I walked away.

"Katie?"

I paused and faced him. "Yeah, Dad?"

"You look really happy."

I felt joy in my heart again as an image of Jay appeared in my mind. "I am, Dad."

"That's great."

As I left the room, he started singing again. I bit my lip. Was it really that obvious? I took my books to my bedroom, and looked in the mirror. *Wow. I really am glowing.* I pulled my cell phone out and called Emo. I told him everything.

Chapter Ten

I WAS SITTING on my bed. It was 5 a.m., thirty minutes before I usually got up. "I'm listening," I whispered, and closed my eyes. I only heard the ticking of my watch. I inhaled the scent of fresh linen. My chest expanded with every breath in, and I felt release with every breath out. From inside, I felt grief, followed by anger, frustration, confusion, and finally, I leaned forward and let my forehead hit the bed, sobbing. I buried my face into a pillow and wept.

Why are you doing this to me? Why? Why would you let me have something so amazing, and make me give it back? God, she's beautiful. I can't let her go. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I love you, I swear. I swear I do.

PASTOR PHIL, MY dad, stood on the pulpit, in his khaki pants and with a Bible in his hand. He loved preaching. It was his passion. "A lot of people are under the impression that once you become a Christian, life gets easy."

The congregation was made of about two thousand people. The inside of the church looked like an opera theatre, where the audience was seated in a semi-circle of rows which got higher and higher as it went back. There were balcony seats also. I was sitting at the very back of the auditorium, in the shadows, where I usually sat, alone. Chanel and Janice thought it was weird and gothic, but they didn't get it. Back there, it felt like I was in a theatre. Even though it wasn't a show, and it was just Dad preaching, I loved the feeling.

The congregation laughed.

He loved it when they laughed at his jokes. "No, I'm serious. People think that. How many here are born again and baptized?" He lifted his hand. The majority of the congregation did the same. "Good, good turn-out. Now, keep your hand raised if life got easier when you got out of the baptism tank." I saw people start lowering their hands, until less than a hundred were up.

"How many feel like your lives got harder?" A few hundred hands went in the air. "It's a reality, isn't it? Nice guys finish last. Isn't that what Jesus called us to be? The nice guys? Turn your cheek, offer your coat, and give without thought of return? Why would God have us finish last? We're the sons and daughters of

God. You would think we'd be first. In fact, Christ said the last shall be first. What does that mean?" He paused for a few moments.

"You ever notice how the kingdom of God is upside-down? The king is the servant, the greatest is the least, and an ideal goal is for us adults to be like children. Doesn't that seem upside-down? What about the fact the king of Heaven and Earth was born in a stinky barn, not in some palace, with expensive blankets and servants to wait on him? Is it upside-down?"

"Is it upside-down that the closer we get to Christ, the harder life seems to be?" Dad surveyed the congregation.

"Last year I took a trip to Ecuador to visit our missions there. When I saw the woman in charge, her name is Shari, she was weeping. At first I thought maybe she'd lost someone close to her. When I went to comfort her, she said 'Pastor, the heart of God is broken.' That caught me by surprise. What did she mean?"

"Shari looked up at me and said 'We've done a lot here, Pastor. These children are being fed. We educate them and treat their sicknesses. But they're just a small number. There's thousands more beyond our reach. Have you walked through the villages?'"

"Shari frowned. She glanced at a TV on a dresser, and said 'I turned on the TV today, which I shouldn't have done. I saw a hotdog eating contest in Chicago.' She turned, grabbed her chest, and said, 'it broke my heart.'" Dad paused again.

"That really is heartbreaking, isn't it? You witness children starving to death and suffering disease, parents struggling, and then you see us rich Americans, throwing our food away for fun." He looked down for a moment, then back up.

"I'd say Shari was close to God. You know when someone is close to God because they feel the brokenness of the world, which is the brokenness of God's heart, and it's a good thing, because that brokenness compels you to make a difference. It's a blessed burden. It's a cross.

"One of the most frequently asked questions is, why does God allow suffering? It's an important question. Let's ask a more scientific question. What is the purpose of pain? What would happen if fire didn't hurt? My house could burn down, and I'd burn with it because my skin might look really cool when it's melting." Some laughed. Dad grinned.

"As a kid I jumped off the roof of my parent's house because I wanted to see if I could fly. I broke my leg. Did it hurt? You bet. It made me not want to try it again." Silence fell over the crowd.

"Is it safe to say pain is an indicator then? Pain tells us something is wrong. It allows us the opportunity to make a change. So, let's think about the starving kids in Ecuador. Their pain should be an indicator we're doing something wrong. Not any of us in

particular, but all of mankind. Could God change that? Sure he could. He's almighty. Why doesn't he?

"Remember, God is our father. You parents can relate to him. Think of the first day of kindergarten. You're happy and excited for your kid, but a part of you is also afraid. What if the other kids pick on him? What if he falls and scrapes his knee? What if today is the worst day of his life?

"Let's say he comes home and tells you it really was the worst day of his life. He fell down, everyone laughed, the big kids pushed him around, and the teacher is mean. He begs you to never let him go back there again. Do you pull him out of school to stop the suffering? Or do you let him live and learn?" Dad let the silence linger.

"We suffer because we choose to sin. We know right and we do wrong. We know wrong and we do it anyway. All the pain in the world is a direct result of our sin. We have the freewill to choose sin and suffering, and so we do. If God took away our suffering, he'd also be taking our freedom to choose."

The sermon went on, but I was getting lost within myself.

I'm suffering because I chose it. I chose this sin. I chose this suffering.

That day I wandered around the church campus. I thought about my faith, which was an integral part of me. I thought of all the years I spent growing up, loving the Christian culture. From the big holidays like Christmas and Easter, to little rituals like communion and prayer, Christianity was never just a set of beliefs I had subscribed to. Christianity was my life.

I thought of breaking Jay's heart. Did I really have to choose? If I had to go through a break-up and never speak to her again, would my faith sustain me? Would my group support me? Could I really be happy?

They say gay love isn't real love. True love comes from God. There's no law against love, but there was a law against homosexuality, therefore, gay love can't be real love. It made sense in my mind, but my heart told a different story.

There was no way I could go on like that. It was too hard, all of it. The best and maybe easiest thing to do would have been to never speak to Jay again. Sure, that sounded easy.

I knew I was going to see her in gym. I'd have to play it cool, and break up with her after school. It sucked, but I had to do it. The right thing is sometimes the hardest thing to do.

Chapter Eleven

“KATIE,” JAY’S VOICE scared me.

I looked up. I was in the locker room, tying my shoes.

Jay sat at the bench beside me. “I got an idea.” Her eyes sparkled in the light, revealing a haze of honey brown. Her smile was big, puffing her cheeks and thinning her lips. It was those adorable tiny freckles that made my stomach turn with regret.

How could I even think of hurting her again? I glanced at the floor. “What’s your idea?”

“Are you okay?” There was an ominous tone in her voice.

I went to the next shoe. “Yeah, I’m just... I’m fine. What’s your idea?” Jay’s face was tense and her mouth slightly opened. For a moment I forgot Jay was a girl, and girls can read each other’s emotions like pop-up books. Her body language, her tone, the look in her eyes, even the touch of her hands, told me everything I needed to know. Unfortunately, she could read me as easily.

I knew Jay was aware I wasn’t really fine.

Jay shifted away for a short moment, and returned to me. “I have a friend who goes to LVA. They’re opening a new play tomorrow. I thought we could go.”

Las Vegas Academy is a high school I wanted to go to, but I never worked up the courage to apply and try out. You have to be very talented to get into LVA. Theatre was just one of the majors they offered.

I closed my eyes for a moment. Jay just kept getting better and better. I looked up at her. She turned away. “You’re wiggling out, aren’t you?” When she came back, her eyes gutted me. I couldn’t. I wouldn’t. There was no way.

“No.” I touched her hand and squeezed it. “I’m sorry, I’ve just been over-thinking. LVA sounds great. I can’t wait.” I tried to look happy, and she did, too. I could tell she was relieved, but also, she understood. Jay saw that I was struggling, and I saw that it made her afraid. I wasn’t going to hurt her though. She trusted me.

Jay stared into my eyes, seemingly searching for something. “Okay.” Her hand slipped from mine as she walked away.

I peered over my shoulder. What did that conversation look like from a third person’s eyes? I wasn’t really worried. It’s not like anyone had heard us. Even if they did, we didn’t sound like a couple, did we?

I DIDN'T FEEL like eating, but I had to try to act normal. I stared down at my plate. It was a chicken sandwich, some tater tots, a bag of Cheetos, and a can of soda. I normally would've devoured such a yummy meal.

Chanel placed her lunch tray down and took a seat across the table. "Hey, miss I'm-too-busy-for-my-group." She lifted her eyebrows.

"Crap. I forgot about group. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Be honest." Chanel opened a packet of ketchup. "What's up with you and Jay? Were you with her?"

"No, I was at home."

Chanel poured the ketchup over her fries. "Did you hook up with her?" I kept silent as I opened my soda can. "Katie, I'm concerned. I don't think you should be talking to her at all. Are you?"

"Why do you care? Do I keep tabs on your sex life?"

Chanel's mouth dropped, and she rolled her eyes to the side. "I happen to be your best friend. That's why I care. If you wanna know about my sex life, I'm glad to share."

I turned away, frustrated. I wanted to cry, but not there, and not to Chanel. "Okay, tell me something. Did you sleep with Kevin Green?"

Chanel blushed. She sipped her orange juice out of a straw. She tried to compose herself. "This is embarrassing. Um, I was pretty much drunk, and," she paused, "I'm telling you this because you're my bestie, but don't tell anyone, okay?"

"Okay,"

"After homecoming, Kevin invited me to a party at his house. He was flirting with me all night. After everyone left, I thought we were gonna, you know. But he rejected me. I don't understand what I did wrong. I'm just glad he saved face for me by telling everyone we did it."

"That was saving face?"

"Yeah. I don't want anyone to know I was rejected by Kevin Green. No guy would want me after that."

Emo called it. I thought. He really is gay.

Chanel paused as she stabbed some fries with her fork. She locked eyes with me. "Well, Wendy thinks we should have another meeting this week since you missed it last night." She paused. "Everyone's concerned about the same-sex thing."

Great. I really need more pressure. I looked down at my plate. I couldn't eat.

It wasn't that I couldn't talk to my small group. Well, no, I couldn't talk to my group. They'd never understand or be compassionate toward my feelings for Jay. They wouldn't help me

explore the options I wanted to –like finding a way to be with her. I knew who would though.

EMO AND I were sitting at the bench in the park by the school, waiting for Kevin and Jay to get out of basketball practice. It was a nice day. The sun was out but the wind was cool. Emo took a drag on the cigarette between his fingers. “I think it’s cool your dad’s a pastor.”

“Really?” I asked.

He let out a nervous giggle. “Yeah. I mean, you get to learn about God. Do you think I’m ever going to learn about God?”

I laughed. I thought it was a silly question. “Why wouldn’t you?”

Emo rolled his eyes. “Because I’m gay, and I’m not trying to be crucified in this lifetime.”

“Shut up, Emo. I can teach you about God.”

He tilted his head. “Aw. I like you, Katie. You’re not like most Christians.”

I chuckled. “Apparently not. Most Christians don’t do what I’m doing.”

“What are you doing?”

I thought of Jay, and how bad I wanted to be with her. “I’m compromising my faith. I’m trying to justify my actions.”

Emo laughed. “You think most Christians don’t do that?”

I studied the cracks in the concrete. If only I could slip through. “What should I do?” It was silent a moment.

“Well, I don’t know much about religion, but trying to be someone you’re not is terrible. Kevin is so miserable because he hates himself. He hates being gay. He gets suicidal sometimes. He treats me like dog poo.

“I used to be like that too, Katie. But now, I’m free. I don’t have to hide or look over my shoulder. I don’t torture myself anymore. Yeah, I might get beat up once and awhile, but it’s better than beating yourself up twenty-four/seven over something you can’t control.

“My advice is to follow your heart and do what makes you happy. Anyone who can’t respect that isn’t worth having around. Real talk.”

I swallowed hard. “I hear you, Emo. But anyone who can’t respect that, well, that would be everyone in my life. I can’t leave my faith. I can’t leave Jay. I can’t live in a closet. That doesn’t leave me any options.”

Emo groaned. “I thought being gay was hard. I can’t imagine being a gay Christian.” He grabbed my hand and squeezed it. “I

wish I could give you better advice. It might help to be around family, though. Listen, Kevin has a timeshare at the MGM. Well, it's his parents, but they booked it for the weekend. Maybe you and Jay can come. Kevin would be cool with it."

I thought about it. There was no way my dad would let me.

Emo took a drag of his cigarette and flicked the butt. He glanced at his watch. "They should be out already."

I looked toward the corner of the park that led to the school. Jay and Kevin came around the corner. "There they are."

Emo giggled. He showed me the side of his head. "How's my hair?"

I appraised it. "Still perfect."

Emo pushed some hair behind my ears. "You look good too."

I bit my bottom lip. This was exciting. When I turned to look at Jay, I saw they had stopped half-way. They were talking. Kevin turned around and walked away. Jay continued coming toward us.

"What? Where's he going?" Emo's eyes started to water.

"He probably forgot something?"

Jay approached. "Kevin said he didn't know what he was thinking, and he can't be seen in public with a bunch of fags like us."

Emo buried his head in his hands for a moment. He came up with tears in his eyes and on his face. "He's such a dick. He acts all macho, and maybe he is, but he doesn't have to be mean. I swear he's like bipolar or something. One minute everything is cool and he loves me, the next minute I'm a disgusting fag and he hates me. Why does he hate me?"

I put my hand on his back. "He hates himself, Emo. Not you."

"It feels like he hates me."

I exchanged glances with Jay. Her eyebrows were up. Her awkward expression told me I would be the one to comfort Emo. Maybe she didn't know what to say. I moved closer to him. "Remember what you said to me? That being gay was hard? He just doesn't know how to deal with it."

Jay sat. "I think you should accept that he's never gonna come out. That way, he won't feel pressured about meeting you in public, and you never hope for something you'll never get."

Emo reached for his back pack. He pulled out some tissue paper, wiped his face and blew his nose. "You guys are right." A pop ringtone went off. Emo reached for his phone and read a text message. "I'm sorry. I love you. I'm just scared to be seen with you guys so close to school. Tell Jay and Katie to meet us at the MGM on Friday. Please don't be mad. I love you." Emo bit his lip, trying to hide his sudden forgiveness. "I guess that's an apology."

"What's up at MGM?" Jay asked.

“Oh yeah. Kevin’s parents booked a room for this weekend. You guys down to spend the night?”

Jay glanced at me. “I’m down if she is.”

Of course I wanted to go. “Yeah. I just have to figure out what to tell my parents.”

Chapter Twelve

I WAS IN psychology, waiting for the class to start, when Zach nearly tripped over his desk while leaning over to scream in my ear. "So, you're desperate to have a penis." I guessed he was excited.

I rolled my eyes as I turned around. "Really, Zach? Freud was clueless as to what women wanted. Women don't have penis envy. We want the respect that comes with the penis. Not the penis itself."

Zach laughed. "Really Katie? There's nothing men have that you want?"

"Respect, just like I said."

I saw Kevin standing beside Zach's desk with his arms crossed. "Get up, nerd boy. I need to talk to the lady."

I locked eyes with Zach. "Don't listen to him."

"Come on, fag. Before I make you cry."

Zach stared at his desk and got out of his seat. Kevin sat behind me with a triumphant expression.

"That was rude," I said.

Kevin's eyes lowered onto the desk. "I know." He looked back up. "Listen, I heard from a friend, that you and a friend will be spending the weekend with me."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah. So."

Kevin leaned in, lowered his voice, and I leaned in to listen. "I'm sorry for being an a-hole. I'm not really like that." His voice was completely different. "Look, I know you're a hardcore Christian, so I respect your reasons for being, you know," he paused as he tilted his head, "closeted. I've been busting my ass for an athletic scholarship at San Diego State. I'm not gonna get it if my rep is trashed. Get it? I'll watch your back, you watch mine. If I'm outted, so are you."

"Don't threaten me, Kevin. I'll watch your back because it's the right thing to do."

Kevin hung his head for a moment, and back up with a grin. This time it was genuine. "Thank you."

"I want you to be nice to my friends. Seriously."

"I'll try." He stood up and raised his voice. "See you Friday night, hot stuff."

I rolled my eyes as I heard "Guess who's got a date with the pastor's daughter."

"You're a pimp, Kev."

"Pimpin' ain't easy."

Maybe it was good that people thought Kevin and I were dating. It was the perfect cover-up. Although I didn't want to be in the closet, it was the safest place for now. No one would guess Kevin was gay. I didn't think I was obvious either. The only thing that would give us away was Emo and Jay. As long as the four of us weren't in public together, no one would know.

I WAS IN my bathroom making sure my hair and make-up were perfect. My parents allowed me to wear lip gloss, mascara and eyeliner. I had to get special permission to wear eye shadow, and my mom always did it for me. I didn't ask for it this time, because I didn't want my parents to think I wanted to impress Jay. I didn't think I needed a whole lot of make-up anyway. Natural beauty. That's what my mom called it.

I stared at myself in the mirror. Just by looking at me, you could tell I'm half Hispanic. Although I have some Irish and German features too. Some people say I look like I'm from South America. I think I'm pretty. Not in a conceited way. I don't think I'm better than anyone, at all.

I was satisfied with my appearance. My brown eyes were unsure of what I was about to do. "Too late," I whispered. "I've already decided."

"Kate-Lynn." My dad yelled from downstairs. "Your friend is here."

I flipped my hair one more time and went down stairs.

"I'm serious, Pastor," Jay was standing in the living room with my dad. I watched them as they talked. Jay looked so sexy. She was wearing grunge jeans with a studded belt. Her white collared shirt clung to her body so you could see her curves. A slim black tie came down the front. She wore a light jacket over it all. Her hair had a messy look going on.

Dad was laughing. "Are you really?"

"Yeah, my parents told me that."

"That God has nothing to do with religion?"

"Yeah, they say God doesn't have a religion. So we don't go to church or anything."

Dad placed his index finger to his chin. "That's interesting. Do you believe in God?"

Jay gave a nervous smile. "I don't know, Pastor. I guess I haven't learned enough about God to decide."

Dad appeared pleased with her response. "Well, you ought to come to One Love."

I approached them. The last thing I wanted was for Jay to feel obligated to come to church. "I think we better go."

Dad placed his hand on my shoulder. "Hold on, now. Your mother wanted to meet your new friend, too." He walked toward the staircase. "Marie. Katie's friend is here. They're about to leave."

Mom came down. "Hi, I'm Katie's mom."

Jay offered her hand. "I'm Jay." She paused a moment. "I coulda swore you were her sister."

Mom nearly blushed as she shook Jay's hand. "Thank you. No, I've got twenty-five years on her."

Jay looked at me, at Mom. "Wow. Amazing."

"Anyway," I reached for Jay's hand, but caught myself. Instead I touched her leather bracelet. "That's rad. Where'd you get it? Anyway, we better go. No late seating."

"Okay, go on." Dad started to walk us to the door.

"It was nice meeting you, Jay." Mom called. I felt her hand on my shoulder and her whisper in my ear. "I'm glad you're making new friends."

"You too, Mrs. North," Jay said. We walked out and Dad closed the door behind us. We got into the car. Thirty minutes later, we were there.

I followed Jay into the theatre building. There were a lot of high school kids and parents. The lobby was big and the lighting was bright. Jay turned to me. "No popcorn?"

I laughed. "It's not a movie theater. They don't allow food in there. We can get some snacks during the intermission."

Jay shrugged her shoulders. "Okay." We approached the entrance of the theatre and Jay handed our tickets to the doorman, or should I say, the door-kid. The boy who took them, ripped a piece off, and handed them back to Jay. I followed her into the dark theatre.

A girl with a flashlight approached. "Need help finding your seats?"

Jay handed over the tickets. "You read my mind."

The girl turned on the flashlight, looked at the tickets and handed them back to Jay. "Follow me." We followed her up to the center balcony. She led us toward the front row and held out her arms. "Your seats are toward the center, please enjoy the show."

"Thank you," Jay and I said in unison. We sat and I took a good look around.

The theatre was nice. It was huge, and there was another balcony above us. The play was a spin-off of the story of Persephone and Hades. I was never really into Greek Mythology, but I was happy to see any show.

The lights were low, but you could see anything if you

squinted your eyes. The theatre was almost full, Jay turned to me. “Excited?”

“More than excited. You’re amazing.” We stared at each other for a moment. After the pre-show announcement, the room went completely dark. I kissed her.

I was going to be with Jay. I would never change my mind again. Not only was I going to be with her, I was going to make some serious life changes. This whole goodie-two-shoe thing would be the first to go.

Chapter Thirteen

THE HOTEL ROOM door opened. It was Kevin. "You made it!" He hugged me, and greeted Jay with a manly handshake. He was relaxed, warm, and happy. Was this the real Kevin Green? "Come in, come in. Check it out."

Pop-music was blaring throughout the room. I could faintly smell cigar smoke. I followed Jay through the foyer. The living room was spacious. There was a huge comfortable couch, a love seat, some chairs, a table, and a bar.

Kevin held out his arm toward one end of the room. "The master room is to the left, which means your room is to the right." He pointed. "We got beer, vodka, and wine coolers," Kevin winked at me. "I bet you like wine coolers."

I bit my lip. "Maybe."

Emo was stretched out on the couch, with a phone to his ear. "Hi, guys. I'm trying to get us fake ID's."

The wall behind Emo was made of glass. It was a view of the Las Vegas strip. I moved closer to it as I peered out at the mini version of the Statue of Liberty. The roller coaster, which looped around the mini sky scrapers, zoomed through. Beside it was the white Excalibur castle. Further on, you could see the Mandalay Bay. A bright light beamed toward the sky, and signaled the Luxor. The strip looked different from that vantage point. I liked it.

Jay laughed. "I already have a fake ID."

"Really?" I asked. "You never told me that."

"You never asked."

Emo sat up and moved over to one side of the couch. "Sit down, relax, gays." He giggled. "I mean guys."

Kevin and Jay chuckled.

I sat on the love seat. "Let me see it." Jay sat with me.

"I have one, too." Emo disappeared into one of the rooms.

Jay pulled out a wallet, and a Nevada Driver's License. I took it. It was her picture. The name was Kirsten Walker. The birth date made her twenty-two. I turned the card to inspect the hologram. "Wow. It's flawless."

"That's because it's legit. I got this from the DMV."

"What?" Kevin came toward us. "Let me see it. How'd you get it?"

I handed him the card.

Jay said, "I have a friend who makes counterfeit documents

like social security cards and birth certificates. They're expensive, though."

Kevin flipped the card over. "Very nice." He handed it to Jay. "Kirsten Walker is your alias?"

Jay laughed. "I wouldn't call it that. I don't do anything with it except get into clubs and bars."

Emo came back. "Here's mine."

"Oh, sweetie, yours looks like crap compared to Jay's," Kevin said.

I reached for Emo's ID. "Let me see it." The conversation went on as I took Emo's card and inspected it. It didn't look bad, or obviously fake. His name was Henry Johnson. I wanted one too.

"Okay, so Katie and Kev, the guy is coming in two hours. Be ready to get your pic taken, and make sure you have a cool name."

Jay reached for the card, and I passed it on.

So many possibilities ran through my head. "Wait, what are we doing tonight?"

Emo positioned himself on the couch, in a sexual pose. "What do you guys wanna do?"

Kevin came from behind, completing the picture. "I have an idea."

I bit my lip and looked away, embarrassed. Jay only laughed.

Emo sat up. "There's Krave and Girlbar."

"We should go to the Fruitloop," Jay said.

I turned to her. "Yeah, what is that, anyway?"

Emo placed his palm on his cheek. "Oh, Katie. You're such a cute virgin lesbian. The Fruitloop is only the hottest gay spot in Vegas."

Jay laughed at Emo's comment. "It's hot 'cause there's a different gay club on every corner." She touched my face. "But we don't have to go anywhere you aren't comfortable."

"It's not that I'm uncomfortable." I paused a moment. I could have been uncomfortable. I could have thought about how I was totally disappointing my dad, deliberately disobeying God, and I was probably going to get killed when this is over, or. I could live in the moment, and have fun. I shrugged off the former thought. "Look, I'm already in trouble, I may as well make it fun, right?"

Jay observed me a moment longer. "Are you sure?"

"She's sure, she's sure," Emo said.

"We could shoot craps," Kevin said.

"Boring." Emo said.

Jay kept her eyes on me. I knew she was waiting for an answer. "Yes, I'm sure."

She kissed me. "Okay. Let's do The Zone."

"I like The Zone," Emo said.

"The Zone is so ghetto." Kevin crossed his arms.

Emo rolled his eyes. "Well, sorry to disappoint your taste, Mr. Rich Parents, but they have the best drag show. Katie's never seen a drag show, have you, Katie?"

"I haven't."

Jay looked satisfied. "The Zone it is."

WE SAT AT a table in front of the dance floor. They were the best seats. Kevin set down a few drinks at our table. "Jay, beer." He placed a drink before me. "Katie, raspberry mojito. I think you'll like that." He handed Emo a drink. "For my love, a Jager bomb. *Et pour moi*, scotch on the rocks." He took a sip.

I heard the loudspeaker. "Hello and welcome to the The Zone drag show." I turned and saw a female impersonator. Or a drag queen, I should say. I was impressed by her look. Her dark skin complimented a sexy red dress with a slit up her thigh. She held herself like a true diva. Although her Adam's apple was apparent, she otherwise looked feminine enough to pass for a woman. "My name is Taylor Vuitton, and I'm your hostess tonight." She looked around the room. "Looks like the house is packed." Taylor locked eyes with me. "...and we got some youngin's in here. Anyone checked these kids IDs?" Taylor laughed. "I'm playing y'all. Have fun."

Taylor turned to another guy sitting in a table next to us. "Ooh. I spy a handsome honey with my little eye." The guy was leaned back in his chair with his hands behind his head. The girl sitting next to him hollered, "He's straight!"

"What?" Taylor asked.

"He's straight!" The girl looked a little annoyed.

"Oh, sure. That's what they all say. You look like the lazy type, leaned back like that. It's okay. I'll do all the work." Taylor laughed and turned to the girl. "I'm playing, girl. I won't steal your man."

Taylor turned to the crowd. "For those walking in the door, I'm Taylor Vuitton, your hostess for tonight. Thanks for joining us this evening. Now, for the first act, I'd like to introduce a very sexy friend of mine. She came all the way from Oklahoma, y'all, give her a hand."

The crowd applauded. Another drag queen took the stage as a popular song played. She flipped her red hair and lip synced as she danced. Some parts were funny, others were embarrassing. Overall, it was very entertaining. A few other drag queens performed. The whole time, Kevin kept bringing drink after drink. It was my first buzz, and I loved it. An hour later, Taylor took the mic.

"Thank you for being a part of tonight's drag show, everyone."

Let's give another hand to our performers." Everyone applauded. "The DJ's about to tear it up." I heard the sound of a scratching record. "So get your ass on the dance floor and have a good time. Remember, here at The Zone, boys look like girls, and girls look like boys. So, before you take someone home tonight, check between the legs to make sure they got what you want. Don't drink and drive, wear a jimmy hat, and tip your waitress, y'all. Have fun."

The record scratched again, and music started bumping. There were strobe lights flashing and disco lights moving. There were so many people, girls and guys. I saw girls holding hands, other girls making out, some girls just talking. There were also a lot of men, cute guys, too. I watched as one came up from behind another, and just held him. They were both smiling. They looked so in love. They started dancing. The floor filled up pretty quickly. There was so much energy in the room, and I wanted to be a part of it.

I picked up my drink and fumbled to get the straw in my mouth. I closed my eyes and started guzzling.

"Babe, do you know what you're drinking?" Jay asked.

She's so hot. I put my drink down, grabbed her, and started kissing her. It felt so good. No thinking. I pushed her away. "You."

Jay laughed. "You're drunk."

"Yeah, you're right."

"I'm drunk too." Jay grabbed my hand and led me through the crowd, onto the dance floor.

The next thing I remember was leaning onto Jay and someone else. I think it was Kevin. I was outside. The air was so much cooler out there. I felt free. "I love The Zone. Let's go again tomorrow."

"Sweetie, tomorrow you're gonna be hung over." It sounded like Kevin. I tried to look at him, but he was moving too fast. Why was he moving so fast? I felt confused.

"Jay?" I hoped she was nearby.

"Yes, babe?" Jay was holding onto me.

I realized I was leaning on her. "Why is Kevin moving so fast? It's like I can't see him." I tried to focus on the sidewalk ahead.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Kevin said. "I'll walk slower."

"That's not what I meant. It's like I can't see straight." I saw Emo walking ahead, shouting something I couldn't understand. Emo was laughing. I started laughing too. "Emo is funny."

Kevin's laughter echoed in my ears. "He's drunk."

"I'm drunk."

"We know, honey, and Jay's drunk too," Kevin said.

I whirled around to Jay. "You're drunk too, babe?"

Jay's light brown eyes looked almost grey. "I'm okay."

"Okay?" I asked. "Are you worried about something?"

She touched my face. "I'm not worried. I just wanna get you back to the hotel."

"Why, so you can take advantage of me?" My mouth felt weird. The sentence came out all wrong.

Jay laughed. "No, so you can rest."

"But, what if I want you to take advantage of me?"

She gestured toward Emo. "Look at Emo. He thinks he's a drag queen."

Emo was walking past a couple and snapped his fingers above his head. "Your husband's gay, sweetie. Accept it. Look at those striped button-down trousers, with that vest, ooh honey, straight men don't dress that good."

The couple was passing us by, and I was trying to get a glimpse of his pants, when I heard, "You wish."

"Excuse me?" Kevin's voice was so loud. "Why do you have to flirt with guys in front of me?"

"Omigod, Kev. I wasn't flirting. I was checking out his outfit and stating facts. It's not my fault you dress like you're straight. Maybe if you were a man and came out of the closet, you could dress better."

Jay touched my face. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, but why are they yelling?" The sound of their voices hurt.

"They're just drunk."

"I don't want us to fight like that."

"We won't."

Then, I woke up.

Hangovers suck. That's an understatement. Unless, of course, you enjoy massive migraines, the feeling of being stuck on a carnival ride, or throwing up stomach acid each time you try to move.

Jay took care of me as best she could. Although I did yell, cry, and complain a lot. The pain was just the beginning.

Dad had probably been up all night waiting for me, possibly talking to the cops, praying with the entire staff, and interrogating my small group. He was going to kill me. I knew I was going to come clean, about everything.

Chapter Fourteen

DAD YELLED AS he stood above me. I sat on the love seat with my head on my knees, crying. My mom was sitting on the couch, listening. "Katie, what were you thinking?"

"Please stop yelling, Dad."

"I will not stop yelling! I can't believe you did something so stupid! Do you realize you could have been raped and murdered? What the hell has gotten into you?"

I couldn't answer him. I couldn't even speak. I was preoccupied with the hole in my chest.

"Tell me why. Was there a boy involved?"

I started bawling. If there was a boy involved none of this would have happened. If there was a boy involved I wouldn't be losing my mind. I wouldn't be torturing myself or the people I care about. If there was a boy involved, I wouldn't be feeling any of this pain. In that moment, I wished I wasn't gay.

I couldn't speak through the tears and my attempts to breathe. Dad may as well have been speaking Kryptonian. All I could hear were my sobs. I heard Mom say something, and Dad fell silent.

I knew it was my turn to speak, but I couldn't say anything. I couldn't tell anymore of the truth. Dad already wanted to kill me. I already felt like the worst person in the world. If I mentioned Jay, he would disown me, and Mom would let him. I kept silent, until finally, Dad spoke, in a calm but angry tone.

"You're grounded. At the least until you can talk to me and Mom. You'll come home right after school. Do not pass go, do not collect two hundred, and the only place you're allowed is the ten a.m. Sunday service. No small group. If you need someone to talk to, you talk to me. Go to your room. I'm taking your door down tomorrow morning."

I got up. My hair was draped over my face, like a red curtain closing in front of me, because I had failed as an actress and the director was through with me. I was glad the show was over, and I could hide behind my hair. I went to my bedroom. I closed and locked the door, buried my head in my pillow and cried myself to sleep.

Morning came, and I refused to leave my bed. My father took my door down. He took my phone, and disconnected the internet. I didn't care. Nothing mattered. Maybe if I lay there long enough, I would die. That sounded like a good idea.

Chapter Fifteen

JAY SAT NEXT to me on the bench in the park. It was our bench, the place I first held her hand, and she held me in her arms. It was the place we fell in love. So much had happened since then, although it had only been a month.

Jay took my hands and kissed them. "What happened?"

I could tell by the look in her eyes that she was worried about me. Before we went our separate ways the other night, we agreed to meet there. We were skipping school, which was another first for me. I wasn't trying to rebel. I just didn't care.

Tears fell from my eyes as I recalled the fight. I tried to cover my face, but I found myself in Jay's arms. Her warmth encompassed me, and I rested my head on her shoulder. The smell of her cologne put me at ease. Finally, I felt okay again.

I stayed in her arms for a few minutes, bathing in her love and reminding myself why I fought so hard with my dad. Jay was worth it. She was so worth it.

When I pulled away, she pushed the hair out of my face. I looked up at her and saw I had her full attention. "I have to tell him."

Jay caressed my face with the back of her hand. "Are you sure?"

I nodded. "I can't do this in-the-closet shit. It's stupid."

She watched me for a moment. "Baby, coming out is scary. It's okay if you wanna keep it down for a while."

I shook my head. "No, it's not. I just wanna be me. I wanna be me all the time. Everywhere I go. When I'm speaking to my father..." I trailed off. Heaviness arose in my chest and I knew I would start crying again, but I stuffed it down. "I'm scared. I'm pretty sure he'll disown me." It was silent for a few moments, and I turned to watch the birds fly from tree to tree. Their lives are so simple. I recalled something Jesus said. The birds have simple lives because God takes care of them. Why wasn't God taking care of me?

Jay gave a nervous expression. "You've got guts, babe. I admire that. I'm cool with whatever decision you make."

I kissed her. It was our first public kiss. It felt good not caring who saw it. There was no way to hide my feelings anymore. There was no part of me that wanted to.

Jay broke the kiss and whispered, "I love you."

Without thinking, I replied, "I love you too." As the words rolled off my tongue I knew no matter what happened between my father and me, I would remain true to my love for Jay.

We held each other. I kept my eyes closed, taking everything in. Everything would be okay. I knew it.

We went to Jay's house. Her parents were at work. At least, that's what I thought.

A WOMANS' VOICE, and a knock at the door made me jump. "Jane." We were in Jay's room, on her bed. I was falling asleep, with my head on her belly. I think she was falling asleep too.

I assumed the woman was Jay's mom, and we were about to get into trouble for skipping school. As I got up, Jay placed her hand on my shoulder.

"Yeah, Mom?" She went to the door, unlocked and opened it.

Jay's mom peered in and made eye contact with me. She was pretty. I figured Jay would look like that some day. I could handle that. I just hope I'd turn out okay at 38.

"Mom, this is Katie. Katie, mom."

I stood up, went to the woman and extended my hand. "Nice to meet you."

She took it. "You too," and looked at Jay. "No school?"

Jay bit her thumb nail. "Uh, yeah mom, we needed a mental health day. Besides, Katie's an A student and I'm, well, I'm passing all my classes."

The woman lifted an eyebrow.

Jay laughed. "Don't worry, Ma. Everything's cool. We just needed to get some important things handled."

"What important things?"

Jay glanced at me, back at her mom. "That's not for me to say, Mom." The woman fixed her eyes on me.

I was hesitant. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Miller. I needed someone to talk to, and, well, Jay's been a really good friend."

Mrs. Miller looked at Jay, and back at me. "Are you really an A student?"

I fidgeted with my hands. "Yes, ma'am."

The woman acknowledged me by nodding her head. "Good. Jane could use a positive influence." She looked at Jay. "Don't make this a habit. There's such a thing as school counselors."

"I won't, Mom."

The woman turned to me. "If you need help, more than just to talk, let me know. I'm in the business of helping teens."

Wow. I was amazed. There I was, thinking I was about to get busted and turned over to my father. "Thank you, Mrs. Miller."

"Call me Terry. I'm not that old."

"Okay, Terry."

Terry and Jay stared at each other for a moment. I wondered what kind of telepathic conversation they were having, and if it had anything to do with me. Terry left the room. Jay closed and locked the door again. "Sorry,"

"For what? Your mom's cool."

Jay came onto the bed. "Yeah, she is." She took me in her arms and we held each other for a moment.

She pulled away and touched my face. "I'm down to do whatever you need me to do, but, are you sure this is what you want?"

"Positive."

Chapter Sixteen

MY PALMS WERE sweaty. I was beyond nervous. All I wanted was for my dad to hug me and tell me everything would be okay, like he used to when I was seven and I'd cry because the big, bad purple-people eater at Chuck E Cheese looked like he was hungry all the time. But, I didn't think that would happen here. I thought my dad might disown me, the purple-people eater might get me, and I might deserve it.

I was in the sanctuary. The last service was over, and I waited for Dad to come to me. I knew he knew I was ready to talk. After everyone had gone home, he came and sat next to me.

Dad's expressions and gestures were warm. I could tell he was eager for the tough love to melt into affection again. My dad loved me. Note the past tense.

When I saw I had his full attention, and he was absorbed by my every breath, I said, "Dad, I'm sorry for the way I've been acting. I'm ready to explain myself."

He waited.

"Remember my friend Jay? Well, we went to the play at LVA that night. Instead of coming straight home like I said I would, we spent the night at the MGM with a few friends." I considered telling him about the club and fake IDs.

"I felt I needed to escape my life. That's why I lied and got drunk, which I'm never gonna do again, by the way." I paused and took a deep breath.

"The reason why I needed to escape is," I closed my eyes and forced the words out, "because I'm gay." I fixed my eyes on the altar. "That girl, Jay. She's my girlfriend, Dad. I'm in love with her. I'm sorry for lying to you, and doing stupid stuff. But I'm not sorry for being gay." I gave him my attention. Every muscle in my body was tense. I braced for the worst reaction I could possibly get.

Dad looked away. All I saw was the back of his head. I wasn't sure what he was thinking or feeling, but it was clear he was trying to hide his initial reactions. He got up, turned to me, and I saw he had tears on his face. In a gentle tone he said, "Come to my office."

I got up and followed him toward the side of the building, down a long corridor, and to the office at the end. Although Dad was being decent by not yelling at me in the sanctuary where we might have an audience, I was still terrified. In fact, I felt like I was following some psychotic killer into his lair where he'd strap me to

a dentist chair and operate on my eyeballs with a tiny drill.

Dad opened the door at the end of the hall. He allowed me to come in, and shut it behind me. He gestured for me to sit at the chairs in the corner of his office. Dad went to a coffee maker at the other end. "Want a cup?"

I shook my head.

He came with his mug, and sat in the seat next to me. It was silent for a minute or so. Finally, "You're in love with a girl."

"Yes."

"Katie, you're very smart. You already know this isn't love. It's a trick of the devil." He leaned forward. "You think you're in love, but you're being deceived."

"Dad, no, I'm not. You just said I'm smart. I know what love is."

"Okay, so tell me. What is love?"

Wow. Dad asked a question that's puzzled philosophers and poets since the beginning of time. I'm supposed to define love with my Sophomore English vocabulary? And if I didn't get the right answer, would I not deserve acceptance from my father? Must I pay for his love with some brilliant definition of the most cryptic concept in the world? No pressure, though.

I closed my eyes. I tried to quiet my mind, and focus. "God is love."

"Good answer. Now, if God is love, and God forbids homosexuality, what does that tell you?"

"That God is cruel."

My father was quiet for a few moments. "That's quite a statement, Katie. How could you say God is cruel? He's been nothing but good to you, your mother and I."

"Dad, I'm not trying to blaspheme or be disrespectful, but God has not been good to me. You have no idea what I've been going through." As I went on, my voice got louder, and I realized how angry I was. "I came here to talk to you, because I chose to confide in my father, but you're too busy defending God to listen to me."

Dad leaned forward. "I am listening. Lower your voice and change your attitude, right now."

I fell silent and cast my eyes to the floor. Tears streamed down my face. My father always managed to make me cry when he yelled. Someone should've given him the greatest dad award for that.

"Katie, I'm sorry you think God is cruel. God is not cruel. Every rule in the book is written for a reason. They're meant to guide you to an abundant life. As your father and your pastor, I expect you to follow those rules. All of them."

I started crying again. I'm not sure if it was out of anger or

grief, or both. "I won't." I stood up. "I'm sick of the stupid rules."

Dad towered above me as he stood. "Sit down, Kate-Lynn Marie, right now."

I obeyed. I wiped the tears from my face, and turned away. My dad sat. "Look at me," he said. I grit my teeth and turned to him. He lifted a Bible in his hand. "I would lay down my whole life for this book, Katie. I believe every word of it. The question is, do you?"

"I don't know." I knew this was borderline suicide, but I was on a roll with this honesty thing.

"What? You don't know?"

"It doesn't make sense, Dad. Jay and I love each other. How can it be wrong if love comes from God?"

"It isn't love, Katie. You have to trust God on this. It's lust. It doesn't come from God. It comes from Satan."

I snapped back. "I know what love is. But you'll believe your book before you believe me. That's how it's supposed to be, right? God first, family second?" That was a low blow. I regretted it as soon as it came out.

"Watch your mouth," he yelled.

I fell silent again.

"You dishonor me, Katie. That isn't okay. What's worse, you dishonor the Living God, and I will not allow it." Dad stood again. "I'm pulling you from public school. You'll go to a Christian academy, and you'll go through an ex-gay program."

"You can't make me change schools."

"I can and I will. Consider tomorrow your last day. You will clean out your locker before you come home. You will respect me, and you will fear the Lord. Until you do, your life will not be fun. Understood?"

Chapter Seventeen

GOD REALLY WAS cruel, I thought. He might have loved the whole world, but not us. God spit on us. He'd created us as a joke. After all I did to be like Christ. After all the love I poured from my heart in the name of Jesus, this is what I got in return. It was just a joke. No more.

No more would I pray to him. No more would I bow to him or obey him. I hated him. As much as I loved God before, I hated him then. I will never worship you again.

Since I had turned my back on my faith, what would I do? Who would guide me? Who would listen to me ramble about my petty issues at 3:00 in the morning, and make me feel everything was okay? There wasn't a human in the world who could replace the love of God. As I realized it, I became filled with fear. For the first time ever, I felt completely alone.

For Atheists and Agnostics it might seem simple to live without God, but for me the thought alone was devastating. Then, something occurred to me. I was going to Hell.

As the idea formed in my mind, I felt energy coursing through my veins. It was rage. As much as I hated God, he hated me back. There was nothing I could do to redeem myself. I was gay. There was no way for me to get into Heaven. There was absolutely nothing to lose.

I was thinking these things as I went through the clean clothes I'd thrown on the floor. I had to do my laundry so it didn't seem like I was packing, since, you know, I didn't have a door anymore. I folded my clothes and placed them into a big duffel bag in my closet. I was leaving. I didn't know where to, but it didn't matter.

Chapter Eighteen

I WAS AT my locker, turning the combination lock. It was a normal day at school, despite being my last. I didn't talk much to anyone. My heart was heavy and my tears had barely dried. It was no one's business what bothered me, so I kept to myself. I felt a hand on my shoulder.

Jay leaned up against the locker next to mine. "I'm going with you."

"What?"

"You're planning on running away. I'm going with you."

I dumped all my books in my locker. I didn't need them anymore. "How'd you know that?"

"I can just tell."

I scanned my locker for anything I would need on the road. My journal. A box of tampons. Motrin. "What about your parents? What would you tell them?"

Jay stepped a little closer. The scent of her cologne invoked an urge to grab onto her and kiss her. Of course, I didn't do it. "I told them my astronomy class is taking a weekend trip to the observatory in Phoenix."

I paused. "Your parents would buy that?"

"They know I love to star gaze."

I zipped my back pack and slammed my locker shut. "But wouldn't they call the school?"

"Don't trip, baby. They already signed permission slips. Told them a friend was borrowing the car. See, Mr. Davis really is taking the class to Phoenix. I'll have my parents drop me off in front of the school bus. I'll wave goodbye, have a conversation with Mr. Davis about how an emergency came up and I can't go. Then I'll meet you at the park."

I searched her face for any trace of resentment. "You were really planning on going to Phoenix, weren't you?"

Jay glanced at the floor a moment. "Plans change. Being with you is more important."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

We walked through the hall. I intentionally swung my arm so that I could touch her hand. I wanted so badly to hold it. "Okay. Park on the corner where I can see you from my window. I'll turn on the shower, lock the bathroom door, and sneak out

the back. By the time they realize I'm not in the shower, I'll be long gone."

"Okay." Jay pulled her cell phone out of her pocket. She checked on the time. "See you in three hours." Jay winked at me, and we went our separate ways.

"IT HURTS TO see you like this." Jay was driving. I was in the passenger's seat, and it was reclined all the way down. I couldn't see the road, and no one could see me. It wasn't that I was hiding. It was just I didn't have the energy to sit up. I placed my hand on her thigh. I hoped it comforted her.

Jay caressed my cheek. "Everything's gonna be okay."

I squeezed her hand. That meant, "No, it won't, but thanks for saying it anyway."

"Katie," she began. "I don't know much about God, or even if he exists, but, I know you have a good heart. If God knows anything about love, he wouldn't send you to Hell."

"These people in church, Katie, how do they know everything? They don't know who you are. They think being gay is a choice, if they're wrong about that, they could be wrong about anything. Obviously something is wrong. How can God love everyone except us? There has to be another answer."

My girlfriend was so amazing. The emptiness ran deep, but those words comforted me in the moment. "What's the answer?"

Jay gave an awkward expression. "I wish I knew, baby. You're the brains in this operation. If anyone can figure it out, it's you."

There was a long silence. I turned my attention inward as Jay turned on the radio. All through my body, I was weary. I fell asleep and had a dream.

I was at the Grand Canyon. The majestic view was breathtaking.

A fire-breathing monster was chasing me. It chased me to the edge of the canyon, and I somehow knew I had to cross over to the other side. As I looked over I suddenly had super long-distance vision and saw a little girl at the edge of the cliff. She was being chased by a monster as well. Her monster was the big purple thing from Chuck-E-Cheese. How could I save myself and the little girl at the same time? I thought I could fly, so I jumped off the cliff, but instead of flying, I fell. Gravity pulled at my feet and I raced toward the red rocks below. I was doomed. Suddenly—

"Baby," Jay shook me awake. "Babe, check out the sunset."

My heart continued thumping in my chest as I realized it was just a dream. I rubbed my eyes and pulled my seat upright.

Shades of orange, pink and purple painted the sky. It reminded

me of cotton candy. For the first time in two days, a genuine smile appeared on my face. I looked at Jay. She was still wide awake and alert.

"I love you," I said.

"Ditto,"

"Where are we staying?" I asked.

Jay turned to me. "With my cousin, Amber, and her roommates."

"Tell me about Amber,"

"We grew up together in Torrance. Well, until I was ten and we moved to Vegas. But I go out to LA every summer, so Amber and I are tight. She has two roommates. I think their names are Ivan and Kawika."

"How old is Amber?"

"I think she's twenty-two now." Jay gave me a wink. That meant we'd have alcohol. I was a little nervous about drinking again. Hangovers from hell definitely weren't for me. "Does Amber know I'm with you?"

"Yeah. I told her everything."

A few hours later, we arrived.

I WAS SITTING on a bean bag in a two-bedroom apartment. Jay was beside me. There were three others there. Amber laid back in her chair. I was a little intimidated by all her piercings. I wondered if the one protruding from her neck hurt. Kawika, on the other hand, wasn't intimidating at all. Although he was covered in tattoos, I felt really comfortable around him. Ivan was just Ivan. He said that his dread locks were a tribute to Bob Marley. He was serious about it, too.

Kawika opened a zip lock bag full of... "Is that marijuana?" I asked.

Kawika started rolling a joint. "You never saw bud before?" The others laughed. I blushed.

Jay put her arm around me. "Katie's a good girl. She's got a bright future."

Ivan put sunglasses on. "My future's bright." He pointed at them. "That's why I wear shades." Everyone laughed.

"Here, Katie." Kawika, to my right, handed me a zip lock bag full of marijuana. "Smell it. This is the best chronic Cali has to offer. Nothing compared to Maui Wowie, though."

"Yeah, Kawika," Amber said, "when you gonna come with that good Hawaiian stuff?"

"Never." Ivan threw a napkin at Kawika.

"Hey, man," Kawika said, "you guys wanna buy me a ticket to

Hawaii? 'Cause you know, it's not like I hate the place or anything."

I laughed. If I knew anything about Hawaiians, it's that they're always homesick, and they go back to the islands every chance they get.

"Anyway," Kawika moved toward me. "You know how to smoke, or what?"

I shook my head, a little embarrassed.

"I'll light it for you. When you hit it, inhale slowly and hold it in as long as you can. Okay?"

Jay put her hand on my leg. "You really gonna do this?"

I sighed. "Babe, I'm going to Hell. I better have fun on the way there." Anger festered in my belly like a sea-monster haunting a deep ocean trench. I ignored it. The monster could eat my shit.

Amber and Ivan laughed.

Kawika turned to me. "You ain't going to Hell." He inhaled again and passed the joint to me.

My hands were shaking as I pinched the thin joint between my thumb and finger. I put it to my lips and inhaled.

Jay leaned over and whispered in my ear. "Slowly, babe."

I wasn't sure if I knew what to do. But I figured I was just breathing through the joint. The smoke was hot. My fingers burned, and I almost dropped it. It felt like my lungs, my stomach, all of my insides were on fire. Suddenly, the burn arose in my throat. It felt as if my lungs were caving in. I choked. Everyone laughed.

Jay put her hand on my back. "Choking is good, to an extent."

Kawika handed me a bottle of water. "Here."

"Thanks," I said between coughs. "How could it be good? My throat's on fire."

Ivan leaned back in his chair. "If you choke, you're gonna get high. No one chokes without getting high."

"Katie, you gonna pass it or what?" Amber said.

At first I didn't know what she was talking about, and I saw Jay reaching for the joint in my hand. "Oh, sorry." I opened the bottle of water and sipped it.

Ivan grinned from ear to ear. "It's all gravy, baby. Puff, puff, give. You'll learn."

I watched Jay as she smoked. It was obvious she'd done it before.

"So, Katie," Amber began. "Is this your first time in LA?"

I looked around the room. Everything moved in slow motion. How funny. I started laughing. Everyone laughed with me.

"She's high," Ivan said.

"Yup, 'cause I get da bomb." Kawika sung his words. Jay explained later his Hawaiian accent comes out when he's stoned.

That was funny too.

I felt Jay's hand caress my face, as if in approval.

"Sorry," I was trying to control my giggle. "What was the question?"

Amber was sipping on a straw in a big red cup. "Is this your first time in LA?"

"Uh... it's my first time without my parents."

"Yup," Ivan and Kawika said in unison.

"First time," Kawika said.

Ivan leaned forward. "You ain't never seen the real LA until you hit the streets."

"Eh, don't tell her that," Kawika said.

Amber laughed. "Jay, you should take her to West Hollywood, isn't Pride coming up?"

I turned to Jay, because I wanted to know more about Pride, but I took a good look at her. Her eyes were red. Her face was bright with joy. She looked cuter than she had ever looked before. Wow. She kissed me.

The kiss ran deep into my body. I didn't expect that. It excited me. I broke the kiss and took another good look at her. "That felt good." I kissed her again.

"Hey, get a room," Amber said.

"Shut up," Ivan said.

Kawika sighed. "They're guests, Amber. They can make out wherever they like."

I didn't like the idea of having an audience. Although I didn't want to, I pulled away. Jay still looked amazing. I was beginning to like this marijuana thing.

"Sorry, guys," I said.

Kawika glanced at Ivan. "Nah, it's all good."

Amber looked annoyed. Ivan turned to Amber and coughed, "ruined it,"

"Whatever." Amber picked up her red cup and started sipping.

The joint was coming around again. It was official. I liked marijuana.

Chapter Nineteen

I WAS SITTING in the passenger seat of Jay's car, looking out the window. California was so awesome. All the houses and buildings were close together. Everyone seemed to be going somewhere fun, like to the beach or a movie set. The weather was nice, and the air was fresh and clean. What I loved most was California was green. It had been years since I'd seen so much grass and trees. I was glad to be out of the desert.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

Jay was nearly jumping in her seat. "To my favorite place in the whole world. Santa Monica beach is awesome. My parents use to take me there when I was a kid. We're just about here, as soon as I can find a spot to park."

A few minutes later, we got out of the car. After I shut the door behind me, I took a deep breath. I could taste the salt in the air. The smell of the ocean was invigorating. I noticed a carnival on a huge dock. The roller coaster reminded me of the church fair. Maybe Jay and I would go on the Big Wheel, and share a romantic view of the ocean. Or maybe we'd just go swimming and kiss underwater. Either way, I just wanted to be with Jay.

The ocean stretched out toward the horizon. I couldn't help staring at it. Once upon a time people believed the horizon was the edge of the world. I wondered how much of what we know today is wrong.

Jay took my hand and we walked toward the beach. "What are you thinking, baby?"

I peeled myself away from my thoughts. "Oh, just about Chris Columbus and how people thought the world was flat. It makes you wonder what we're wrong about right now, what someone will discover a hundred years from now and change everything we know."

Jay was silent a moment. "I love your mind."

"It could be time and space travel, or, or intelligent life on Mars, or a way to live underwater."

"What about a gay gene? You think someone might discover a gay gene?"

I thought a moment. I wanted to choose my words wisely, as not to offend her. "Well, I don't know about that. Sometimes, I think, people are born gay. But I also think some people become gay. I mean, think about it. Some girls are naturally born athletic

and mechanical."

"Like me."

"Yes. But that doesn't make you gay, because there are lots of athletic girls who are straight. At the same time, people say that girls become gay because of some kind of sexual abuse. But, there are lots of straight girls who have been sexually abused, too."

"What makes people gay, then?"

I let my eyes follow the seagulls walking along the shore as I thought. "I think it's a number of factors. Maybe the genes that make you athletic, maybe some abuse and —"

"I've never been abused," She said.

"Well, me neither."

"So, forget everyone else. What makes us gay?"

I turned to her and watched the side of her face. "Well, I was taught it was wrong. Yet I fell for you regardless. I think, for me, it's you. I'm in love with you, Jay. I never thought I'd be attracted to a girl, but you're just something else. My heart didn't care what gender you were. I just wanted you."

Jay slowed her pace to a stop. She kissed me, and pulled me down into the sand. We sat facing each other. The sand was cool. I grabbed a handful of sand and watched it slip through my fingers. Like time, I thought.

"What about you?" I picked up her hand and placed it between mine. "What makes you gay, Jay Miller?"

"Well, Kate-Lynn North. I think I was born gay."

"Why?"

"Because I always felt this way. There was no big change for me. I always felt the way I feel now. I just didn't know what it was when I was a kid."

"Elaborate, please."

"Well," Jay said, "When I was in the second grade, there was this girl, her name was Dominique. She would walk by on her way to the mailbox every day. All I kept thinking was how I wanted to be friends with her. But, I never got the guts to talk to her. I didn't think it was a crush because I didn't know what sexual attraction was. By middle school, I recognized that feeling. I was totally crushing over her."

"Okay, that makes sense." There were a few moments of comfortable silence. "I wish Emo and Kevin were here."

"Yeah," she said, "too bad they're gonna miss Pride."

I became excited. "We're going to Pride?"

"Oh, baby." she turned to me. "This is your first Pride, huh?"

Pride is a big deal. I remembered what Emo said about Pride.

Emo and I were sitting in the food court at the mall. "It's like this.

When you come out, it's scary at first. You don't really know how people will react to you. Then you start to see that only the fakers hate you. The people who really love you, they don't care if you like boys or girls. They just want you to be happy. Then, you get the Pride feeling. It feels good to be gay. You feel free. Then you come to the parade and the festivals and meet your extended family." He popped a strawberry in his mouth. I'd been curious about Pride ever since.

ON THE MORNING of the parade, Jay and I were asleep on the sofa-couch. "Wake up, lesbians!" It was Amber's voice.

I rolled over and saw Amber was already dressed. "What time is it?" I asked.

"It's time to get ready." Amber tossed a couple of T-shirts at us. "I'm coming with you."

Jay groaned. "Five more minutes, Ma." From under the sheets, Jay put her arm around me and pulled me close.

"I ain't your ma. Now come on, get ready."

Ignoring Amber, I rolled over to face Jay while pulling the sheets over our heads. I kissed her lips. "I love you, Jay Miller."

Jay's eyes lingered on my face. "I love you, Katie North."

In that moment I felt my heart smiling. This joy was delivered to every cell in my body, like blood. I had never known what it meant to be happy until then.

"Aw, what a precious moment. I wish I had a Kodak." The sheets were suddenly pulled from us. Amber stood above us. "Now get up, lesbians!"

"Yes, sir, Sir Hitler, sir!" Jay jumped out of bed and did a Nazi salute. I laughed as I sat up. I reached for one of the T-shirts. They were red and black. There were two words on them: Legalize Gay. "Nice."

"You're welcome," Amber said. "Aren't they awesome?"

Jay checked out the other shirt. "Sweet. Thanks, cuz."

"Yeah. I didn't know you were gay," I said.

Amber sighed. I got the feeling, she'd been through this before. "Nope, not gay. I'm what you call—"

"A straight alley." Jay said.

"Exactly." Amber glared at me. "Why aren't you out of bed, yet?"

Jay disappeared into the hall. "I got the bathroom!"

"Fine," I rolled my eyes. I climbed out of the sofa-bed and started to fold the blanket.

Amber took the pillows into the bedroom. "Is this your first Pride?"

"Yeah," I hollered.

Amber reappeared. "Excited?"

"Uber. When is the festival?"

"It's after the parade. The parade isn't long. The festival is an all day event. People get wasted out of their minds. But, we have to pace ourselves because after the festival is the after-party."

"Wow." I put the blanket in the hall closet. "That's a lot."

"It is. We'll probably need a nap between the festival and the after-party." Amber helped me to fold the bed back into the sofa. We replaced the cushions and took a seat. An hour later, the three of us went through a fast-food drive thru. Then, we went to West Hollywood.

AMBER DROPPED US off on a corner. She wanted us to save the best seats in the house. The roof of a convenience store. "I'm gonna find parking."

"Okay," Jay said.

We climbed out of the car. It was a nice sunny day, scattered clouds. Cool breezes. The streets were filled with people. I spotted a group of teenagers. The boys were shirtless and the girls wore bikinis. Colorful rainbows were painted on their bodies. They had little rainbow flags tucked into their pockets.

Some people wore blue and yellow shirts. They carried a huge sign that bore an equal symbol. "The Human Rights Campaign," Jay explained. "They're the biggest activist group in the nation."

"Cool."

There were a lot of people dressed in drag. Others were in leather. I spotted some girls wearing the same shirts we were. Apparently the shirts came in blue, yellow, and purple also. Beside them, there was a group of young adults. They all had suckers in their mouths. When they moved from their spot, I saw and heard something atrocious.

A group of men carried signs. One read, "God hates fags." Others read, "Repent or burn," and, "The blood of Jesus is not HIV positive." The leader of the group was screaming on a loud speaker. "Repent of your sins. You are in danger of the flames of Hell." The man locked eyes with me. "You need Jesus, young lady. God hates fags."

My heart jolted at a thousand beats per minute. I felt a rush of adrenaline. I was instantly compelled to act. I didn't hesitate or think of what I was going to do. It just came naturally. I marched up to him. I snatched the loud speaker out of his hands. I pointed it to his face and screamed into it. "You're wrong. God doesn't hate anyone. If Jesus were here, he'd be hanging out with us! The only people Christ condemned were the religious leaders. Like you!" I

threw the loudspeaker back at him.

People started cheering. I noticed everyone around us was staring. All eyes were on us.

"That's right."

"You go, girl."

"She's a liar." The man shouted. "The Ten Commandments says 'Thou shalt not lie.'"

"Shut up." The crowd yelled.

"Yeah, take your ass back to church."

The man turned off the loudspeaker as he turned to me. "They hate me. You see? I bring the message of Jesus Christ." He pointed to the crowd. "They're too evil to accept it. So they hate me. I'm doing God's work."

I took a deep breath and tried to speak calmly, although I was still kind of loud. "You aren't bringing the message of Christ. The message of Christ is love. Your message is hate. That's why they hate you. Your ministry isn't working. Can't you see that?" Before he could respond, I walked away.

Jay's eyes were wide, and her mouth opened. I could have sworn she was drooling. "Whoa, what was that? You're such a bad ass. That was so awesome, babe!"

I blushed. My nerves started to calm. I thought about what I had just done. "Yeah, that felt good." It really did. It felt like satisfaction. "Now, come on before someone takes our seats."

We made our way into an alley. There was a green dumpster alongside the brick wall. We used some trashed boxes to get on top. From there, the roof was in arm's length. Jay climbed up first. She helped me. On the roof, we pulled up some milk crates and sat in silence for a few minutes. The convenience store below us was at a crossroad. There was a sea of people along the barricades that separated the sidewalk from the street. The energy in the atmosphere was high.

Jay took my hand. "I admire you. What you did back there. That was heroic. Those Jesus freaks are always here. Most people shrug them off, but not everyone can. I've never seen anyone stand up to them before. I don't think I've ever done anything that awesome in all my life. I mean, those people in the crowd, you helped them, Katie. You helped me."

"How did I help you?"

"You made me feel like I could do something important. Like I could stand up for people who don't know how to. We don't have to take their crap." It was silent a moment. "Would Jesus really hang out with us?"

I felt contentment within me. There was something about Jay and I talking about Jesus that felt right. "Yes. Absolutely. Jesus

hung out with prostitutes and thieves, and so called scum bags. He went to the parties. He was accused of being a drunk."

"Really?"

"Yes." I felt my heart stirring. I missed Jesus.

"And he condemned religious leaders?"

"The self-righteous leaders, yes. The ones who made religion impossible for everyone else."

There were a few moments of silence.

"So," Jay began. "Anyone can meet Jesus? Not just religious people?"

"Anyone. Jesus especially loves the outcasts."

"Like us."

"Yeah." I paused. "We would be his friends."

Jay contemplated. "The way you talk about Jesus, it makes Christianity seem like it could be good. I've never heard it like that before. I heard Jesus was cool, but was he really like, a democrat?"

I laughed. "I wouldn't mix politics with it, baby. Politics is so complicated. Jesus was about love."

"Yeah, but it sounds like he was for the minorities, against the Religious Right. Isn't that the democratic way?"

I thought about it for a moment. "I don't know, baby. I don't think it's fair to claim Jesus belonged to either party."

Silence came over us.

I started thinking about God the Father and Jesus. I felt closer to Jesus. Jesus was the cool, loving, and accepting part of God. The Father was the one who wanted to send me to Hell. Their personalities contradicted each other.

"Hey, lesbians!"

I turned and saw Amber pulling up a crate beside us. She had a plastic bag in her hand.

"It's about time," Jay said.

"Yeah, well. I took it upon myself to bring some drinks." Amber pulled out three paper bags. She handed one to Jay. "For you, my cuz. The wine-beer." She handed one to me. "Katie, those are alcoholic energy drinks. They're hella good." She twisted the top off her bottle. "Malt liquor for me."

The three of us cracked open our bottles. Amber pulled a joint out of her cigarette box. She lit it and passed it around. It wasn't long before the parade came through.

There was a gang of biker girls, a float of performing drag queens, some hot muscle-boys in a series of convertibles. Behind the cars, there were guys dressed up as angels and devils. There were marching bands, floating bands, a few thousand rainbow flags, and more fun looking floats.

"I have a question," I said.

Jay turned to me. "Yeah?"

"Do the drag queens dress up only to perform?"

"Uh." She sat up straight and watched the parade as she thought. "The queens do it to perform, yeah. But then there's the transgenders. They do it because it's who they are. They feel like women trapped in men's bodies, and vice versa. It's kinda complicated, so I just stop trying to understand it, and just accept it, you know?"

"I mean," Jay continued, "some people are homophobes because they don't understand us, but why do they have to understand? People deserve respect whether you understand it or not."

Amber cleared her throat. "People are stupid. Plain and simple. A priest gets busted for messing around with kids, and they say it's because he's gay. A terrorist flies a plane into a building, and they say it's 'cause he's Muslim. The American public is retarded."

"Obviously the priest is a pedophile, not a gay man. Obviously the terrorist is a brainwashed lunatic, not a God-fearing Muslim. Obviously, a transgender person is feeling some sort of disconnection from their gender. All it takes is a few minutes to use your brain. Obviously, that's a little too difficult for some people."

I laughed. "Agreed."

Jay said, "Can we stop talking about controversial stuff?"

Amber leaned forward. "What do you wanna talk about?"

"Getting out of here before we get too drunk to climb down."

I stood up. "Good idea."

"Yeah, I got a buzz," Amber said.

I don't remember much of the day. We went to the festival and got drunk. A lot of girls hit on Jay. I was a little jealous, but I didn't care much. She was coming home with me.

Later that evening, we went back to the apartment. We definitely needed a long nap, because we went to the club. Amber insisted we go without her. She wouldn't admit it, but I knew she was too tired.

JAY PULLED INTO the parking lot. She turned to me. "You ready?"

I checked my reflection in the mirror. "Do I look okay?"

"You look great, babe." We got out of the car. The air was cool, almost cold. We hurried into the club. We stood in a short line, handed our fake ID's to the bouncer, and went inside.

The club was starting to get crowded, and the drag show had already commenced. As Jay took my hand and led me to a table, I

kept my eyes on the stage. A beautiful queen was lip syncing to the song *How Will I Know* by Whitney Houston. I was slightly attracted to her. It was probably her pretty face, and very woman-like body. I was more impressed though, by the fact she had the guts to be herself. I couldn't imagine having the guts to get on stage and do what she does. I didn't even have the guts to try out for LVA.

Jay and I took a seat. "My mom's been blowing up my phone." She pulled out her cell phone messed with it a little. "I'm not answering it."

"Are you worried about getting into trouble?"

"Nah. I should probably turn my phone off, though. Cops can track through GPS."

"Or cell towers."

Jay turned off her phone and shoved it in her pocket.

A girl wearing a bikini approached with a platter of vials. Some were filled with a pink liquid, others with blue or green. "Shooter?"

"Sure," Jay answered. The girl offered them to me, and I took a green vial. Jay paid her. We drank the shots and gave her the empty vials.

The rest of the night was great. We got a good buzz, but we weren't drunk. Jay didn't want to drive back to Amber's just yet, so we decided to walk to the closest diner to sober up a bit.

The place looked empty when we went inside. There was a food bar, and booths along the walls. Behind the bar, there was a window with a counter which led to the kitchen. That's when I saw him. The brown-skinned boy looked directly at me. His tattoo-covered arms should have made him appear dangerous. Instead, I got a really familiar vibe from him.

He took a good look at me, then at Jay. He turned around and hollered, "Mike, we got customers, man," and that was it. The other guy came out, took our order and served our food. I didn't think anything of the guy, but later I would see him again.

Chapter Twenty

WE WERE IN Amber's bedroom. Jay's hands were shaking. She was holding back tears. There was a wild panic in her eyes. Jay was clutching her cell phone in one hand. "My dad fell."

"What?"

"I, I have to go home."

"Wait, what?"

She took me by the hands. Tears fell from her eyes. "Katie, my dad fell nearly thirty feet off that tower he's working on. He's in critical condition. I don't see how he could've survived it, but he could be, I..."

I took her into my arms, and she cried on my shoulder. I couldn't believe what was happening. God, please...

I stopped the prayer dead in its tracks. I wasn't going to pray, but then what? I kept silent.

"Katie," she pulled away. "We have to go home, babe. We have to leave now."

My heart started racing. "No."

She blinked her eyes. "My dad might not be alive much longer. We have to go."

"I can't go back home. I'm sorry about your dad, Jay, but I can't go home."

Jay stood up. "Are you kidding me?" She started to gather her things.

"I'm sorry. If you have to go, just leave me here."

"No." She went out to the car. I followed behind her.

"Jay, I'm sorry about your dad."

Jay threw her things in the trunk and opened the car door. "Get in the car." She climbed in, shut the door, and started it.

"No."

She started screaming. "Katie, this is a matter of life and death. My dad could be dead before I get there. Get in the f'ng car. Now."

I couldn't believe this was happening. I couldn't believe her dad was hurt, and she was so angry. I thought of going back home, but the thought alone was unbearable. "No."

"You're f'ing unbelievable. Now I see your true colors, Katie. You're a coward. This is the last time I'm going to say this, get in the f'ng car."

"Stop yelling at me. I'm not going home with you. If you have

to leave, go."

Without another word, Jay was backing out of the driveway, and racing toward Las Vegas. It wasn't until she was gone that reality occurred to me. I was alone in a big city without a clue.

Jay was gone. She was the reason I ran away. She was the reason I defied my father and turned my back on my faith. Jay was the reason I came all the way out here, to some place I didn't know. Now, she was gone.

As I watched her drive away, I felt as if the very life of me were dissolving. Maybe I should have called her and told her to come back, and I'd go back to Vegas with her. But, as scared as I was of being alone in a big city, I was even more terrified of facing my father.

As I took a step back, I saw Kawika sitting on the porch. "You okay?"

I sat next to him, put my head in my hands and cried.

He put his arm around me. "Can I ask you something, Katie?"

"Yeah."

"Why'd you run away? What's so bad back home?"

I wiped my face with my hands and cleared my throat. "My dad is a pastor, and I'm gay. He'll never accept me." I stared at the asphalt in the driveway, where Jay's car used to be. I already missed her.

"Have you tried?"

"Tried what?"

Kawika shrugged his shoulders. "Tried telling him how you feel about Jay and being gay and stuff."

I took a deep breath. "Yeah. He won't let me see her. How am I supposed to live with that?"

"I don't know, Katie. But you gotta go back sometime."

I shook my head. "There has to be another answer."

"Run forever? You can't live like that. Nobody can."

It was silent for a few moments. "I can't believe I'm this stupid. I'm not supposed to be stupid."

Kawika laughed. "Blame it on the weed. I do."

"Ugh. I don't wanna think about it, Kawika."

"Okay. Wanna smoke some more stuff that makes you stupid?"

Kawika was cool. He convinced Amber and Ivan to let me crash on the couch until I figured out my next move. He even planned to help me sort through it all. I thought he was your typical Hawaiian. You know, the guy that, "spreads *aloha*," by helping friends in trouble, buys your favorite munchies, and tells you how much you should visit the islands with him. Yeah, I thought I had Kawika figured out. That is, until he made a pass at

me I couldn't ignore.

KAWIKA AND I WERE hanging out in the living room, sharing a love seat and a colorful glass pipe. "You ever been with a guy, or what?"

"No." I took a hit off the pipe and passed it.

"Then how do you know you're gay?" He took the pipe from me.

I exhaled, almost coughing. "Because of Jay."

"You know what I think? I think you never met the right guy. You might be bi." He took a hit and passed it.

"Ah, I guess it's possible, but I doubt it."

He choked, and we started laughing together. When the laughter died, he asked, "Why do you doubt it?"

"Because I can't imagine a guy being able to satisfy me."

He handed me the pipe. "Oh yeah? So, Jay satisfies you?"

"Yes." I took it.

"How do lesbians have sex?"

I blushed. I was still a virgin so I really wasn't sure, but I didn't want to tell him that. "Wouldn't you wanna know?"

He gave a devious look. "Yeah. I wanna know."

"Kawika, use your imagination. How do you think it's done?"

He leaned back in the chair. "You guys give each other head?"

I bit my lip. The conversation was borderline uncomfy. "Uh...."

"What about fingers? Do you use fingers?"

"Kawika, I don't thi—"

"Would you ever let a guy watch?"

"No." I didn't have to think about that one. "Hell, no."

"Okay, uh, Katie." Kawika shifted in his seat. "You know I'm a guy, right?"

I laughed. "I've noticed it, yes."

"So, everything you're saying to me is turning me on."

I leaned away from him. "What's your point?" I glanced down and saw his hand in his pants. "Omigod," I stood up and walked to the bean bag along the adjacent wall.

He stood up and came toward me. "I'm sorry, Katie. I thought you wanted to, you know."

I was pissed. Kawika had been so cool up until that point. He'd just ruined our friendship. "How the hell could you think that?"

Kawika paused and appeared confused. "We were talking about lesbian sex. You wanted to make me hard, right?"

"Just because I answered your questions, doesn't mean I want to fuck you!"

He put his hands on his head. “Aw, I’m sorry. I’m so stupid.”

I went into the other room. I gathered my things. I didn’t know where I was going, but I wasn’t about to stay any longer with that idiotic creep. Maybe it really was the pot that compelled me to make the dumbest decisions ever. Yeah, let’s go with that.

All I had was a backpack, some clothes, and \$65. What had I done? I followed my emotions to this dead end road, where all I could do was feel sorry for myself. I went to West Hollywood, because it was the only place I was familiar with. I knew it wasn’t some gang’s territory. But then, I wasn’t really sure.

Chapter Twenty-one

I WAS WALKING down the boulevard. It was late at night. The cool air reminded me that life was cold. My heart was cold. Ever since the day Jay drove out of my life, with sharp icicles in her eyes and blizzards in her words, draining my heart of all its blood, I've been cold. How I longed for warmth again.

I heard the sound of someone crying. When I turned the corner, I saw a woman wearing a red dress, sitting on a bench at a bus stop, with her head in her hands. I felt empathy for her, so I slowly approached and put my hand on her shoulder.

Immediately, she turned to face me. It was her, the girl from the drag show. I was surprised to see her, but even more so, I wanted to comfort her.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm okay. I'm always okay."

I sat with her. "I don't mean to be rude, but it doesn't look that way."

Her head drooped. "I'm sorry. I'm having a bad night."

"How so?"

She sighed. "A customer robbed me, and my pimp is a prick. He thinks I spent the money on dope, as if he doesn't feed me enough dope."

I looked at her with curiosity. "I thought you were a drag queen."

Her face lit up. "You've seen my show?"

"Yeah, I thought you were great."

"Thanks, babe. Yeah, sweetie, that job don't pay enough. I don't like selling my body, but how's a girl supposed to make a living?"

"You could get a regular job."

Her eyebrows scrunched up. "Oh no, sweetie. No one wants to hire a freak like me."

"Why not? Are you a transgender?"

The drag queen pressed her lips together. "You're very polite. I like that. However, I'm a woman." She looked away. "So, what's your story?"

I contemplated my words. "I ran away from home because my dad's a pastor. I came out to him and he wanted to put me through an ex-gay program."

The woman laughed. "Ex-gay? So the program is supposed to

make you straight?"

"Yeah,"

"Wow. Ex-gay. Do you think it works?"

I thought a moment. "I don't know if it works. But if you believe in God, anything is possible." I couldn't believe I'd just said that. God and I weren't on speaking terms, yet I'd just acknowledged my faith. It was one thing to talk about Jesus. But, God, as in God the Father, was different. There was a moment of silence, in which I struggled against the anger in my chest. Didn't I hate God? Couldn't I resolve this conflict by claiming to be agnostic or atheist? Out of curiosity, I asked. "Do you believe in God?"

Her face hardened, and I wish I hadn't asked the question. "Fuck God." Her voice had changed dramatically. She sounded like a man, a very angry man.

"Huh?"

She stood up, towering above me. "Is God the asshole who made me?"

"Uh," I didn't know what to say.

"Fuck him. Why did he make me like this, huh? What the fuck did I do to deserve the life I live? Huh? Was I a fucking Adolf Hitler in a past life? If there's such an asshole as God, fuck him."

My heart raced with regret. "I- I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

"Yeah, well you did." She picked up her little black purse and walked away. "See you in Hell, sweetheart."

There was a lump in my throat as I watched her leave. I wished I'd never mentioned God. I just wanted to talk to her more. I thought maybe we could've helped each other. Some help I was.

I sat there. After a few minutes I got up and resumed walking to nowhere. As fear crept upon me, I realized how stupid I was. I should've gone home with Jay. At least, I knew the streets of Las Vegas. I knew which neighborhoods to stay out of, and which buses take me where. I knew people who would let me sleep on their couch. Stupid, stupid me.

I was getting hungry and tired.

As I turned the corner, I saw the diner Jay and I ate at. I went in and seated myself in a booth. It felt as if I could melt into the seat. The table was comfortable enough to be a pillow. The diner was fairly empty, so it was quiet enough to fall asleep.

I got lost in my thoughts. I missed Jay. I wondered if her dad was okay. I wished I could call her. I imagined where my phone might be, in my father's desk drawer.

"What are you having, sweetie?" I looked up and saw an Asian woman as she pulled a pencil and pad out of her apron.

I glanced at the menu on the table. "Um, I'll have the country

fried steak, and a glass of water.”

She scribbled on her pad. “Coming right up,”

As I waited, I contemplated on the words the drag queen said. I wish I knew her name. She hated God with a passion. It hurt to hear those words. I felt I hated God too, but not that much. I felt God messed up with me, and maybe he messed up with her too. Except that she was beautiful. The world might look at her and see something ugly, something worth degrading, but I didn't. I saw that she was an amazing person. Thoughts of her lingered as my food came and I quickly finished it.

After I ate, all I wanted was to sleep. I sat at the table, until the waitress told me I had to leave. Reluctantly, I got up and walked out. I felt a cold breeze and shoved my arms in my shirt. I heard a cat's meow. I looked down and saw a calico cat staring up at me. It meowed again, and started to walk into an alley. It was cute. I didn't know why, but I followed it.

At the back of an alley, there was a corner that was cleaned out, a twin sized mattress and a blanket. Some homeless person must've slept there. Were they going to return? As I processed those thoughts, I fell onto the mattress and cried. I was officially a bum. I clung to the blanket and cried myself to sleep.

The next morning I cleaned up in the bathroom of the diner, and ate a light breakfast. I knew my money was going to run out soon, and every time I ate, I realized I was screwed. I didn't know what to do. I stayed in the alley for a few days. I ate, I slept, I cried, and I wished I had some pot to smoke.

Being a bum really put things into perspective for me. I thought of how my parents sheltered me and gave me everything I needed. I had no idea that outside those walls of love and protection, the world demanded the best of me. Meanwhile, I didn't know what the best of me looked like. I thought I was a smart person. I mean, I am a smart person. Yet, as smart as I may have been, I wasn't anywhere near ready for the real world. All it took was a few bad decisions, and I was homeless. The world didn't care if I had a place to sleep or food to eat. The world didn't care if my heart was shattered, if I was lost, or if I ever found my way back home. It was up to me to save myself. Except I had no idea how to do that.

A few mornings later, I found a Styrofoam container on the ground next to a door in the alley. I opened it. It was a full plate of fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and green beans, untouched. There was a plastic fork and napkin there too. Thank you fo —

I halted my prayer. I was thankful, but not to him. Depressed, I didn't leave the mattress all day. I didn't have the strength. I started to look and smell like a bum, and I couldn't deal with it.

Later that night, I stared up at the sky, feeling sorry for myself. There were more stars out there than I'd ever seen in Nevada. The stars were brighter, and the sky was darker. I spotted the constellation Scorpius. It was the easiest to make out. As my eyes drifted, I thought of the story of the Prodigal Son.

You see, Jesus often spoke in parables, which are allegories. These stories with hidden meanings required the listener to reflect in order to figure out the message. The story of the Prodigal Son was easy to understand, I guess.

There were two sons who both worked for their father on a wealthy farm. One day, one of the boys asked his father for his inheritance because he didn't want to wait. His father granted the request. The boy took his money and went into town. He was reckless and squandered the money. It wasn't long before he was poor and hungry, and wanting to eat pig slop. The boy decided to go home to his father and ask to be hired as a servant. When his father saw him coming home, he ran out to meet him. He gave the boy a gold ring, slaughtered a fattened calf, and prepared a celebration feast. The other son was envious because while his brother was out living recklessly, he stayed home and worked hard. No feast was prepared for him. The father said to the second boy, "We have to celebrate because your brother was lost, and now he is found."

As you can see, I seem to be the prodigal son. Except that going home wasn't an option. My dad wouldn't slaughter anything except me. Did it even matter though? If God sent me to Hell, there would be no way to escape that. Life would be meaningless. Nothing I achieve or attain would matter. What would be the point of living?

As I pondered, I saw a shooting star. I felt pain in my chest. No, it was more than pain. It was a ton of bricks. Thanks, God, thanks for nothing. I whispered "I'm never going back."

A teenage-looking boy walked out the backdoor of the diner, talking to someone inside. "Yeah, yeah, I told you I needed one." The door shut. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a pack of cigarettes and lighter. He lit one and pocketed the rest. In his other hand there was a Styrofoam take-out container. It took him a minute to notice me a couple of feet away, at the back of the alley in the shadows. "Hey." He walked toward me. I sat up. He was wearing black jeans and a white button up shirt, the restaurant uniform. He had a white apron tied around his waist, and a white baseball cap, worn backwards. His arms were covered in tattoos. He was the guy I saw when I came in with Jay that night. For some reason, it was weird.

"Uh. This is kind of embarrassing." He held out the plate. "But

here. It's country fried steak."

"You're embarrassed? I'm the idiot..." I trailed off, took the plate, and opened it. "Thanks." It was still hot. There was a plastic fork in there too. "You've been leaving food for me." I took the fork and began to eat.

The boy pulled up a milk crate and sat down. He puffed on his cigarette. "Yeah, well we're supposed to throw away the leftovers." There was a moment of silence. "So I can tell you aren't from the street. Why aren't you home?"

I glanced up at him. That was a personal question for someone I'd known for forty five seconds. I didn't mind it. It only took me by surprise. "I ran away. My dad's a jerk."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Is he a drunk?"

"No."

"Addict?"

"No."

"Violent?"

"No."

He laughed. "He sounds like a decent guy so far." His laughter reminded me of this kid from church. Patrick. I liked Patrick, as a friend. He always made me laugh. I recalled warm memories. The kid had a warm personality. "What makes him a jerk?"

I hurried to chew and swallow. "He's a pastor."

"Really? That must be cool."

I almost choked. "Are you kidding me? Why would that be cool?"

The boy puffed on his cigarette. "He's probably a good dad, huh? Does he take you fishing?"

My dad took me fishing once. We rented a row boat and lost the oars on the lake. We were stranded for hours before anyone found us. We never went back. "Yeah, he's pretty good. But we're in a conflict that can't be resolved."

"What kind of conflict?"

I sighed. Was I really going to have this conversation with a strange kid? I looked up. "I'm gay. He's a pastor. The situation just isn't working."

He puffed his cigarette again. "It would work if you changed."

"Change? Why? Who I am isn't good enough? I don't deserve love from my dad or from God because I'm gay so I have to change?" I picked up the fork and began shoveling mashed potatoes in my mouth. I was pissed. Maybe it was best to keep my mouth full, since I didn't want to bite the hand that fed me.

"No, I didn't say that. You deserve love from your dad and from God." He puffed his cigarette. He stared up at the sky, and looked back at me. "I wish my dad was a pastor."

I was still angry, but I was glad the subject had changed. "Why?"

"My dad did the best he could for me." He puffed on his cigarette. "Unfortunately, his best kinda sucked." He laughed. "Let's just say I never had a real dad." A moment of silence passed. "That's okay though. I'm a Christian too. I found Jesus last year. He saved my life."

"That's good to hear."

"I'm sure you know the Bible way more than I do. You already know what the Bible says about being gay, right?"

That was the second time he insulted me. This time I had no food in my mouth. "Who are you to judge me? You're sitting here smoking a cigarette. What does the Bible say about desecrating the Temple? Huh? Or is that one a little inconvenient for you today, O holy one?" I closed the lid on the Styrofoam container. My appetite was gone. I stood up and walked past him.

"Wait, Katie." He stood up. "I didn't mean to piss you off. I'm, I'm not perfect. You show me a perfect Christian and I'll show you Jesus Christ Himself."

I turned around. "How did you know my name?"

"Katie? You told me."

"No, I didn't." I double checked my memory. "Are you a stalker?"

"I'm not a stalker. I must have overheard it or something. Didn't you come in with your girlfriend last week?"

I chuckled. "Stalker."

"I'm not a stalker. It's just I noticed you."

I noticed you too, I thought.

The guy looked me in the eyes. "Look, *chica*, you think you got it bad, but peep reality for a moment. You got a great dad who cares about you. You know how many kids are going crazy right now, because their dads are abusive, addicted, or absent?"

"Look around you, Katie. You're living on God's good graces right now. You could've easily been kidnapped or raped, or something worse by now. If I didn't find you here you'd be starving. You're blessed and protected and, just stop acting like a brat!"

I was speechless, on the verge of tears. He was right. I was acting like a brat and being stupid. I didn't know what else to do.

"You don't belong in an alley. You can sleep on my couch till you figure out what you need to do. Plus, you need a shower."

As I swallowed my pride, I felt a heavy weight lifted. I turned to face him. "Thank you. What's your name?"

"Marc." He held out his hand. "Marc Santos."

I took it. "Katie North."

Marc appeared nervous. "Okay, Katie North. Let me, uh," he turned toward the backdoor. "Don't go nowhere. I'll be right back."

He came out a few minutes later with a brown backpack over his shoulder and a set of keys in his hands. "Come on," he walked past me, and I followed him.

We walked around the corner to a driveway. There was an old Cadillac. It reminded me of Jay's car, because it was rusty and dirty. He climbed in the front seat and unlocked my door. I got in. The car reeked of cigarettes, but it was decently clean. Marc started the car. It stalled. He tried again. "Come, on," it started, and we were on our way.

After a few minutes of silence, he asked "So where you from, anyway?"

I cleared my throat as I kept my eyes on the passing scenery. "Vegas." I glanced toward him.

"How'd you get out here?"

"My girlfriend," I paused. I felt sad, but moved on. "If she's still my girlfriend, I mean. She's got some friends out here. But that didn't work out, and she went back to Vegas."

He met my eyes "She left you?"

I recalled the last night we talked. We fought. She called me a coward. Then, yes, she left. "Yeah. It was probably my fault though. I told her to leave."

"She shouldn't have left you here. That's messed up, man."

"Her dad was hurt, so it was an emergency. I should've gone home with her."

"Maybe." Marc pulled into a driveway in front of an apartment complex. The stairs and rails were wooden, and painted white. We got out of the car and went up stairs. Apartment 674.

Marc fumbled with his keys and I followed him in. The apartment was a one-bedroom, and cute. It smelled like cigarettes. The carpet was stained. The furniture was old and torn, but, it was decently clean. I took a seat on the couch.

Marc closed and locked the door. "It ain't much, but it's home." He wore a dorky expression. He looked like he could've been one of those hard core gangsters, tattoos and all, but I could tell he was a dork. "Oh, hold on," he went into a room.

"Here," he came out and handed me some clothes, which were crumpled in his hand. "I washed them already."

I opened them up to see a tank top and shorts. They were my size. "Who do these belong to? Your girlfriend?"

"Nah, just a girl. She don't come around here no more, so you can keep them." He turned and pointed toward another room. "There's the bathroom. There's clean towels in the cabinet."

I stood up. I guessed he wanted me to take a shower right

away. I was good with that. Before I went into the bathroom I asked, "Marc? Why are you helping me?"

Marc had turned the TV on, and it looked like he was messing with an Xbox. He didn't bother looking up. "Ain't that what Jesus would do?"

For some reason, his answer made me happy. "Yeah, it is."

When I got out of the shower, he was still playing his video game. I sat on the couch. He glanced over. "So, Katie. Tell me 'bout yourself. You play video games?"

"No."

"What about sports? You like sports?"

"Not really."

He paused the game and looked at me. "Please tell me you like Mexican food."

I thought of mom's cooking. "My mom makes the best Mexican food."

"Wait, you're *Chicana*?"

"Half. Don't look so surprised."

Marc studied my face. "Okay, I can see that. But you act White."

I laughed. "Well, I'm White, too."

"Can you speak Spanish?"

I shook my head. "It's sad, I know."

"Aw man. A *Chicana* who don't speak Spanish. There's something wrong with this picture." He laughed. "Naw, I'm playing, girl. My Spanish ain't that good, either."

My eyes lingered on his face. I thought Marc was kind of cute. I felt awkward and looked away.

He stood. "Make yourself at home. You ain't a guest. Go in the fridge. Wash your clothes. Do whatever. As for me, I'm going to take a shower." He left the room. I heard him walking in the hall. He closed the bathroom door.

I looked at the TV and picked up the video game controller. It was a racing game. I thought I'd try it out.

OVER THE NEXT few weeks, I got to know Marc. There were some awkward moments, but we laughed through them. He was a gentleman, and he never made any sexual comments or anything. He told me I could stay as long as I needed to. I knew I had to figure out what my next move would be. I knew the right thing was to go home. After all, Jay was gone. I didn't want to face my dad, but I couldn't stay with Marc forever. Or could I?

Chapter Twenty-two

ONE DAY WE were watching TV, and eating KFC in the living room. I was never really interested in sports, but Marc watched football all the time, so it was starting to rub off on me. Well, this afternoon, his team was winning, and I was rooting for the opposite team.

"Go, go go, that's perfect..." he stood up.

The quarterback had the ball, waiting for position. The receiver was open. The pass was perfect and...

"No. Aw man, you butterfingereed son of a..."

I laughed. I had no allegiance toward either team. I just liked to oppose Marc.

He turned to me. "Yeah, you like that huh? You always jinx my team."

"Don't blame me if the Raiders suck."

"No, they're going to the play-offs. Just watch." The game went to a commercial. Marc got up and entered the kitchen. He opened the fridge. "I know you don't like beer," he reached in and pulled out a brown bottle. "So, I kinda took a guess at some girlie drinks."

I laughed. "Girlie drinks?"

Marc reached into the fridge again, and pulled out a bottle and read the label. "Uh... it's a wine cooler, piña colada. All girls like that, huh?" He closed the fridge door with his foot, popped the tops off the bottles and returned to the couch.

"I don't know about all girls, and I've also never tried it." I took the bottle he held out.

Marc held his bottle up. "To trying new things,"

"To trying new things," and I drank. "It's good." His cell phone rang.

"What's up, man? No way, I ain't working today, bro. What you mean?" Marc picked up the remote and turned the volume down. "What'd he look like? Did he have a scar on his hand?" Marc looked stressed out. "Don't do nothing 'til I call you back. Just listen, homes. Don't do anything." He hung up, and chugged on his beer.

"What just happened?"

Marc finished his beer and turned to me. "Katie, there's some things about me that ain't so good."

"Like what?"

He paused in hesitation. "You really wanna know?"

"Yeah,"

Marc reached for the remote and turned the TV off. "Okay, but this was before I met Jesus." He paused again, seeming somewhat dreamy. Suddenly, his eyebrows turned up as he clenched his fist. "I used to be down with the Latin Kings."

"What's the Latin Kings?"

He cast his gaze to the floor. "It's a gang up in Pasadena, where I'm from. Anyway, they think I betrayed them. They tried to kill me, but I escaped. Well, Jerry, the cook, the guy who just called, said Hector, he's the leader of the Kings, Hector showed up at the diner looking for me. Someone must've seen me and said something." He turned to me. "What should I do?"

"Call the cops."

Marc shook his head. "That ain't an option, Katie."

"Why not? The police are there to protect you."

He stood up. "No, *chica*, the police are there to protect you, the middle class white folks. They just wanna beat us down and lock us up."

"Well, if you're in a violent gang, I can see why they'd —"

"No, Katie. It ain't just about gangs. It's about color. I don't know how it is in Vegas, but here, the cops only protect their own. They don't respect brown or black unless it's in a rich neighborhood. That's the whole reason why we have gangs, so we can protect our own too. Calling the police is like betraying my own kind. Get it?"

It was clear that I offended him. I didn't want to believe the cops were crooked, but I also didn't want to assume Marc was wrong. "Yeah, I'm sorry. I guess things are different here."

Marc went into the fridge and grabbed another beer. "If I were my old self, I'd show up to Hector's house, packing heat. They want me dead. It would be my life or his. But, I'm not my old self." He took a long swig, and sat on the couch beside me. After a long silence, he asked, "Katie, what would Jesus do?"

I thought for a moment. "Jesus would give his life." It was silent again. In some situations it was impossible to do what Jesus would. "Why do they want to kill you?"

"I told you. They think I betrayed them." He stared off into space. "They sent my little brother to kill me. He shot three rounds, but I got away." I noticed a tear on his face. He quickly wiped it off with his finger and took another swig of beer.

I leaned toward him. "I'm sorry about your brother. That must've hurt."

He stood up. "I took care of that bastard. I made sure he was fed, clothed, protected. I was his father, because we didn't have

one. Our dad was a coward. After we watched our uncle get smoked in our driveway, all he knew how to do was get f'd up and run away. I sacrificed my childhood to take care of my bastard brother. All it took was a favor from Hector to turn my own blood against me." He drank.

I didn't know what to say. After a few silent moments, I asked, "Why do you drink so much?"

Marc hung his head low for a moment. He took a look at his bottle. "Good question, Katie. I don't need this." He went toward the sink and dumped his beer out. He went in the fridge and opened another bottle. He dumped it into the sink and tossed the bottle aside. One by one, he emptied his case of beer. He slammed the empty bottles on the counter top, harder and harder each time. They started to shatter.

"Marc, stop." I didn't know what to do. I wasn't sure how to be there for him. I couldn't even give him decent advice. He stopped breaking the bottles, but leaned over the sink and started to cry. I touched the back of his head, and rubbed his back. "It's okay." Marc grabbed me, took me into his arms and cried on my shoulder.

SOMETHING HAPPENED TO me after that experience. I learned something new and disturbing about the world. It's cruel. I'd always known terrible things happened to good people, but I'd never realized how it affected children. My childhood was filled with nothing but laughter, balloons, and chocolate cake. For some people, like Marc, it was hard. Real hard.

I thought of how great my dad was. I remembered the night in the alley, when Marc said my dad loved and took care of me. He said he wished his dad was a pastor. I realized how lucky I was to have been raised in such a loving and secure home. Those thoughts made me miss Dad.

Would it be so bad if I went home? Could I go through the ex-gay thing and survive? Maybe it was the answer. It would certainly please my family, my friends, and well, everyone. Would I be happy?

I missed Jay. Was she still in love with me? If I went home and saw her, would I still be in love with her? Would we be starting from scratch? It was easier to think clearly about the problem without Jay around. Maybe it was because my emotions weren't in the way. Or maybe, it just wasn't meant to be.

Chapter Twenty-three

"KATIE." MARC WAS sitting across the table from me. We were having dinner. He cooked my favorite meal, *enchiladas*. It wasn't quite like Mom's, but it was great. He looked nervous.

"What's up? What's wrong?" I shoved a piece of food in my mouth.

"Na, nothing's wrong. I just wanted to talk to you about something."

"Like?"

Marc hesitated. "Ever since I met you, I started to, well, uh." His eyebrows went up and he looked away. He let out a chuckle. "Okay, lemme start over. A guy like me," he paused and looked away again. It was clear he was looking for words. We made eye contact. "I like you, Katie, a lot. I tried to see you as just a friend, but I can't. You're like my home, my dog. I don't wanna ruin that, but I'm attracted to you. I mean, you're fine. Come on, what guy in my position wouldn't go for you?"

I was shocked to hear those words, but then again, I kind of expected it. Why couldn't guys befriend girls, without throwing sexual attractions into the mix? I felt the urge to run.

"Wow. I'm flattered, Marc. But I can't say I feel the same way. I think I'm still in love with Jay."

Marc leaned back in his chair. "Yeah but, it's not right, Katie." He leaned forward again. "I've been bitin' my tongue for a minute now, but I'm gonna say what's on my mind. Your whole life got flipped upside down when you decided to be gay."

"I didn't decide that."

"You ran away from home, Katie. You ran from your dad. You're running from God. I know you love Jesus. Just stop doing what you're doing."

"Or what, Marc? Or I'm going to Hell?"

He paused and looked down for a moment. "I didn't say that."

"Yet it's what you think. You don't wanna say it because it's rude, but that's what you believe."

Marc hung his head in frustration. When he looked up, he said "Katie, I believe in the Bible. I believe what the Bible says. I don't get to pick and choose what to believe. I believe it all. I think you do too. You're just in denial."

I stood up. "Thanks for everything, Marc. I'm leaving now."

He stood up and went to the door and blocked it. "Where you

gonna go, Katie? You know I don't get it. You're so effin' smart, but sometimes you're so stupid. Can't you see that running is getting you nowhere?"

"Let me pass, Marc."

"Why, so you can find some alley to sleep in? Where are you going?"

"I don't know where I'm going!" At that moment, all my emotions flooded through me. I felt a great void. I missed my parents. I missed Jay. I felt hopeless. I just wanted to run forever. But, Marc wasn't going to let me.

He looked down, and I could tell he was trying to deal with his frustration. Maybe I should've been dealing with mine. "I'm sorry I pissed you off. Just stay here and calm down. If you want to leave, that's fine. But I want you to figure out where you're going first."

I knew Marc was right, and the answer was to go home. I tried to hold back tears. He took me in his arms and let me cry. After a few moments, he said, "Katie, I can take you home to your dad. Everything can be okay." He pulled away. "I know I don't have much, but if you let me, I can take care of you. You won't have to worry about anything. We could just be together."

I kept quiet as I listened. Everything he said appealed to me. I wanted everything to be okay. I wanted to see my dad again. I didn't want to stress out anymore. Did I want to be with Marc? I didn't know. I didn't think so, but then, I wasn't so sure.

THAT NIGHT I lay on the couch and thought about my predicament. Did I have the guts to face my dad and the consequences that followed? A sadness came over me, like a layer of grey clouds on an evening breeze. I was a five year old, helpless and afraid. What did I do? I got up and went to Marc's bed.

Chapter Twenty-four

I DIDN'T SLEEP with Marc. I mean, I slept with him, but I didn't sleep with him, you know? I just wanted him to comfort me, and he did. Maybe it was a mistake, but I didn't regret it. Marc never tried anything. All he did was hold me as I fell asleep. That was all I wanted.

"Wake up sleepy head." Marc shook me.

His bed was warm and cozy. When I opened my eyes, I could tell by the dimness of the light in the room that it was way too early to be awake. I wasn't used to getting up before 11 a.m. There must have been a good reason for it. I mean, there better have been.

I rolled over. "Why? It's too early."

"It's a surprise. I'm going to take you some place cool."

"Where?"

"Uh." His eyes rolled to the side. "It's a surprise. You know what the word surprise means, don't you?"

I grabbed a pillow and threw it at him. "You know what the word sleeping-in means, don't you?"

Marc laughed. "That's two words, Katie."

I got up and tossed another pillow at his face. "Smart ass." I went to the bathroom to get ready. Where could he possibly have been taking me? Someplace cool? Like Six Flags? No, I thought. Marc wasn't that fun.

After breakfast I got in the car, anxious to learn where he was taking me and why. What if there was a catch to it? I realized in that moment I liked surprises. I liked the anticipation. It was somewhat dramatic.

We weren't driving long. Marc pulled up to a parking lot of some church. I thought he was going to turn the car around or get something from the backseat. He turned the car off.

"What?" I looked at the church. Marc reached into the glove box for a Bible. "You're kidding, right? You didn't just trick me into going to church?"

His eyebrows went up. "Surprise."

"Oh my god, Marc. You tricked me. Fail. I'm not going in there."

Marc touched my shoulder. "Katie, I've been good to you."

"Until now." I pushed his hand off my shoulder.

"I've been taking care of you. All I ask for in return is to accompany me to church. Is that too much to ask?"

"Yes."

Marc gave me a cute, pleading face. "Really?"

"Okay, no, not really." I thought about it. He really did take care of me. Although no part of me wanted to go to church, it was the least I could do for him. It was all he wanted. "Fine. But next time let a girl know she's going to church. I could've dressed a little better."

"Aw, don't worry, girl. You look good. Everyone's casual here."

My nerves were getting to me as I went inside. I understood why, when I used to invite people to church, they'd say stuff like, "I would catch fire as I walk through the door." It always sounded so ridiculous, but that's really how I felt. God and I weren't on speaking terms, and yet there I was, in his house, in defiance. Perhaps I should've burned, but I didn't.

Marc introduced me to a bunch of people, some old and some young, but everyone was polite. As I interacted with more and more people, I began to feel at home. Oh yeah, I thought, this is what church felt like.

By the time the service started, my nerves were completely settled. It was a Pentecostal church, and I wasn't used to it because people were speaking in tongues and shouting. Back in my dad's church, it was more normal. My dad used to say speaking in tongues is a really great gift to have. He doesn't encourage it during the service because it scares away the new comers.

The sermon was okay. The pastor wasn't as good as my dad, but he was good. I still hadn't begun to talk to God yet, but I would very soon.

IT WAS PROBABLY the third time I'd gone to Marc's church. Each time I went I felt a little more comfortable, a little less guilty, and a little closer to speaking to God again.

"Katie, I want to pray for you." That was Pastor Mike.

"Uh," I hesitated. I felt Marc's hand on my shoulder. I turned to him, and he gave a nod of approval. I turned back to Pastor Mike. "Okay,"

The service hadn't started yet. People were still filing in. Pastor Mike took me to the altar. He laid his hands on me. I felt Marc's hands on my back. As Pastor Mike starting praying, I heard Marc's voice from behind me. At first, I listened to their prayers. I had to make sure they didn't say anything that offended me. I turned my attention inward. I felt everything, intense sadness and anger. Instantly, I started praying. Not aloud, but in my heart.

I hate you. I never wanted to be gay. I never wanted anything

like this. Why would you do this to me? You knew I would fall in love with Jay. You know how beautiful she is.

I started crying.

God, I miss her. God, I love her. I hate you. This is so hard. I can't do this. I can't do this by myself.

The hopelessness of my situation became clear to me. My life was too hard to go about on my own. I'm sorry. I need your help. I'm sorry for being stupid. God, I don't want to do this anymore. I don't want to hurt anymore. I miss Dad and Mom. I'm sorry for hurting them. God, I don't want to go through the program. I like being gay.

I hesitated.

I want for everything to be okay. I'm ready now, for whatever you need me to do.

As the silence set in, I felt a tingling throughout my body. It was subtle at first, but as I exhaled, I released all the pain and anger I'd been feeling for so long. I felt a tingle in my heart. It reminded me of sugar being stirred in a pitcher of Kool-Aid. At first it was subtle, but the stirring sensation got stronger and stronger, until my whole heart was caught in this mysterious whirlpool of... I didn't know what. I'd never felt anything like it before. My body began to feel light, as if I could take off flying. I didn't know what was happening. All I knew was it was amazing.

God, this feels good. I love you. Take it. Take all of me. Take my life, my heart, take all my burdens. I'm letting go. Make me yours again.

Something crazy happened. The tingle in my heart stirred more intensely. It was a sharper sensation. It made a distinct impression. I can't explain how I knew what the impression was. It was a strong intuitive feeling. What I felt in my heart was a message, You have always been mine. Tears fell down my face. For the first time in my life, I heard the voice of God. It was indescribable, undeniable, and amazingly beautiful.

The next thing I knew, I was lying on the floor. The tingles in my body were beginning to fade, but the lightness was still there. I wanted to lay there forever, afraid the feeling might go away if I moved. The presence of God was the most amazing feeling in the world. Don't ever go away. Please don't go away. I want to be with you forever. I love you. I lay there in silence and stillness for, I'm not sure how long, but I didn't care. I was in love.

When I heard the voice of the pastor over the mic, I opened my eyes and saw Marc kneeling beside me. He took me into his arms. "Are you okay?"

I got up and hugged him. We held each other for a few minutes. It felt really good. "I'm good. I'm really good."

"Good. Praise God."

That was it, I thought. My life would be perfect from there on out. Why wouldn't it be? I had the God of the universe on my side. He would take care of everything. I was going to go home to Dad. I'd do whatever Dad wanted me to. Maybe, just maybe, I might fall in love with Marc.

You might think I was brainwashed. From the outside, it would certainly seem that way. If you've never had a personal encounter with God, there would be no other way to understand how I changed so dramatically. If you think I was brainwashed, that's fine. I won't try to change your mind. Just bear with me.

THAT NIGHT I went for a walk. It was nice out, and I wanted to feel the breeze on my skin. I wanted to smell the trees. I wanted to talk to God.

"Everything feels like it's falling into place. The best thing I ever did was surrender to you. Now I know why some people are so Jesus-freakish. They're just in love with you, and they'd do anything for you. I just want to feel you with me always. Yes, I'd do anything to feel you always."

The message in my heart, Is that true?

"Yes."

I heard my name. I turned in all directions, and saw her car. Jay was driving toward me fast. My heart had plummeted toward the floor, along with every hope I previously entertained.

Chapter Twenty-five

JAY PULLED OVER right away and jumped out of the car without turning it off. As soon as my eyes beheld the impossible perfection that was Jay Miller, I knew I still loved her. I loved her very much. She took me into her arms, and I hugged her back.

I buried my face into her shirt. The leathery smell of her cologne brought back familiar feelings, like being safe in her arms. In that moment, all I wanted was to be in love with Jay.

"I'm so sorry, Katie. I'm sorry I left you here. I shouldn't have done that. I've been looking for you everywhere."

"How did you find me?" I asked.

"Ivan said he was in West Hollywood when he rolled pass you in a car. He wasn't sure it was you, but it was my only lead so I kept driving and asking around. But that doesn't matter right now." Jay pulled away and looked me in the eyes. "Katie, Emo is dead and Kevin's in critical condition."

"What?"

"Remember the night we went to The Zone? They got into a fight on the street. When they made up, they kissed and hugged. Someone recorded it on their phone. They made a video all about outing Kevin. It's all over Facebook. Kevin thought it was Emo who outted him, so he shot Emo and himself. Emo's dead but Kevin survived."

"No, no."

"It's true, Katie."

"When?"

"About a week ago."

It was a nightmare. It had to be. I would wake up any moment in Marc's bed and tell him I had the most horrible dream. Or, this wasn't a dream, and Jay didn't really say Emo was dead. I heard her wrong. Yet, I knew I was wrong. A rush of memories flooded me. It was like a tidal wave, flushing me of every thought or emotion I previously entertained.

Emo and I were at the arcade. He was depositing some tokens in one of those dancing games. "Don't trip, girl. It's easier than it looks."

I saw a crowd already forming around the arcade. My nerves were getting to me. This was why I couldn't try out for LVA. Performing was scary. I wasn't a great dancer, and I wasn't good at

arcade games either. "Okay, but can you set it at an easy level?"

Emo flashed the most endearing expression as he got into position on the dance pad. "Anything for you, my love."

I blushed. I loved how Emo called me "honey, sweetie, and my love." It wasn't romantic at all, just sweet.

I pushed Jay away. "No, it can't be true."

She held me tighter. "It's true, Katie." Another memory possessed me.

I was with my small group at Wendy's house. They were talking about some random boring subject. I was trying to stay awake. My phone went off. I pulled it out of my bag and ran toward the bathroom. "Hello?"

"Katie?" Emo was crying.

"What's wrong?"

"My dad is such a prick. I don't know why I let him get to me. I came home and I told him I wanted to take acting classes. I thought he'd be happy or even proud maybe. Stupid me. He said he could never be proud of a faggot son. He said I'm not his son." He broke down. "You think I'd be used to this by now. You'd think I wouldn't care. I'm such a baby."

I stayed quiet for a few minutes, giving him a chance to continue talking. I heard him sniffing. "I'm sorry your dad is so mean, Emo. Do you want to meet me somewhere?"

Twenty minutes later, Emo and I were at the park by the school. His eyes were puffy, but he was calm. He puffed on a cigarette. "Thanks for coming, Katie. Sometimes it helps just to be around family." That's exactly what we were. Family.

I let my head fall on Jay's shoulders. "How can he be gone? Jay, he was my best friend." I felt her hand rubbing my back. I never told him he was my best friend. Did he know it?

"I know, baby. I know."

I couldn't believe he was gone. Gone forever.

Jay let go and looked me in the eyes. I could tell she was checking to see if I was okay. I wasn't. "Come on," she said. "Let's go before someone steals my car."

I followed Jay into the car, still thinking of Emo. I cried. We shut the doors, she put the car in gear and we were off. "Let's go to the beach."

"Okay."

We sat in the sand. I could taste the salt in the air. The ocean was calm, but I wasn't. The sounds of the water caressing the shore were like whispers, while my soul was screaming in agony, the

victim of a sea-monster, eating the very life of me. Images of Emo came to mind.

I recalled the day I stopped him at my locker, and he told me the story of his first Brad Pitt movie. I thought of the day Emo told me he wished he could learn about God. I told him I would teach him. But I didn't. A deep regret pulled my heart down, like weights attached to my ankles, pulling me to the ocean floor. I wish I'd spent more time with him. I wish I'd taught him about God. I wish I told him that since the day I came out to him, he became my best friend. I wept, and Jay wept with me.

After our tears were gone, we lay on the sand, holding each other. It felt so good to be in Jay's arms again. Despite the terrible circumstances, I was at least glad to be with her. A light flickered in my mind. "What about your dad?"

Jay wiped the tears from my face, although I could see she was crying, too. "He's okay, thank God. He'll be in a wheelchair for few months, but he's fine.

"Thank God," I repeated. My mind started racing at that point. My love for Jay and Jay's love for me couldn't compare to the love of God. That isn't something that was taught to me in Sunday school. It was something I experienced, something I knew with all my heart. My relationship with Jay brought me heartache, and it tore me from my family. My relationship with God brought me peace and joy. It wasn't about my dad anymore. It was about God.

I took a moment to observe the ache in my heart, and I considered telling Jay about Marc, but I didn't want to hurt her. We already had enough to hurt over. We lay in silence for another twenty minutes or so. Finally, she said "Are you ready to go home now?"

I hesitated as I sat up. "Yes, Jay. My dad will make me do the ex-gay thing. You know that, right?"

Jay was quiet a moment. She whispered, "Yeah. But, you'll be eighteen in a year and a half. We can just keep it quiet until then." She sat up and observed me. "I didn't get a chance to tell you. In the union, there's this high school program. Starting next year, I'll have one class at the union hall, learning the carpenter trade. When I graduate, they'll get me a job as an apprentice. Baby, I'll make twenty five dollars an hour. That's just to start. I'll top out at fifty five. I can support you while you go to college. UNLV is a good college, right?"

I was quiet, afraid to say what I was thinking.

"What's wrong? I thought you'd be happy."

I hesitated. "Jay, I had a really intense experience the other day."

Her eyes darted to the side, and met mine. "Tell me about it."

I faced the ocean, hoping for courage out on the darkened horizon. "I went to church, and I heard God speak to me."

"What did he say?"

I turned to her, in hesitation. "He said I was his. He's my best friend now, Jay. He's always there."

Jay backed away, as if I had some contagious disease. "You're scaring me, Katie. You don't sound like yourself."

"I've been staying with this guy."

Her face dropped. "What? Who?"

"His name is Marc. He's been helping me." I got up and looked her in the eyes.

"Are you dating him?"

I looked down for a moment. "No." I locked eyes with her again.

Jay's eyes were wide. She shook her head. "That wasn't very convincing."

"I'm confused."

She turned away. Her jaw was locked. "What are you saying, Katie?"

I kept my eyes on her face, wishing I could take her pain away. "I'm saying I have no idea what's going on in my heart. I mean, I know I love you. I always have. But, I wanna be good for God. This guy Marc, he's nice, and...I don't know." We stared at each other for a long moment. I grabbed Jay, intending to hold her.

"Don't touch me." She pushed me away. Tears streamed down her face as blood seemed to escape my heart. "Katie, I knew this was going to happen. I knew I was stupid for dating a Christian, but I fell in love with you anyway."

Confusion set in again. Jay had my heart. There was no way around it. It was easy to deny when she wasn't around. Standing in front of her, seeing her cry only made me want to take her home and love her forever.

I had just come full circle. I was back to my original dilemma. I was in love with a girl, and I couldn't control my heart. The first time, I tried denying my religion for Jay. The reasonable thing to do was to try the second option. Deny Jay for my religion.

"Is he going to bring you home?"

I locked eyes with her. There was a shield over her heart and soul, made of heavy iron or steel that couldn't be penetrated. When I gazed into her eyes, I couldn't see her anymore. The beautiful and dark depths of Jay Miller, was no longer in my reach. My heart ached. "I want you to bring me home, Jay." I went to grab her again, but she backed away.

"No, you don't," she said, "You wanna be straight. You just said it."

I started bawling again, covering my face with my hands. "Just let me say goodbye to him, then I'll come home with you."

"If he's so great, why won't he take you home?"

I glanced up at her again. The expression on her face gutted me from the inside out. "He would, Jay. I want to go home with you. Please take me home."

"Fine."

I WAS SITTING in the living room with Marc. He was next to me on the couch. The TV was off. When I told him I needed to talk to him, he reached for the remote and shut it off right away. I liked that he made me feel important.

"I'm sorry about your friend who died," Marc said. "I support your decision to go home and do the ex-gay thing."

"Of course you would support me."

His eyebrows scrunched up. "Isn't that what you want? What you need?"

"You're only supporting me because you want me to be straight so I can be in love with you."

Marc took me into his arms, and held me. He looked me in the eyes. "No. I'm supporting you because it's the right thing. I mean, I wouldn't mind you being in love with me, but that ain't the point."

I cast my eyes away. I resented him now. He was the reason Jay was out of reach. "I know it's the right thing. I'm just scared."

"Scared of what?"

I studied the stains on the carpet, imagining my life being stained with mistakes I couldn't take back. "Of never being happy."

"Katie, you gotta trust God."

"I do."

Marc touched my face with the back of his hand. "Call your dad. Call him now and tell him you're going home."

I pushed his arms away and hugged my legs to my chest. "I will. Marc, Jay is outside. She's bringing me home."

Marc cast his eyes to the floor. "Oh."

"She came looking for me."

"You're still going to the ex-gay thing though, right?"

"Yeah."

"Okay." Marc swallowed hard. His eyes blinked a few times. "Do you have everything?"

I pointed at my backpack beside the couch. "Yeah, I never had much."

He stood, took me into his arms and held me tight. "Call me. Please don't forget to call me."

Tears streamed down my face. I didn't think it would be hard

to say goodbye to Marc. He had become such a good friend. "I'll call you once I'm home."

He walked me to the door, grabbed my hand, and just before I walked away he said "I love you, Katie."

I turned and hugged him. "I love you too, Marc."

Chapter Twenty-six

I RUMMAGED THROUGH my bag to get my keys. I was standing outside of my house with Jay. It was still light out, although the sun would be setting soon. Fear gripped me and held on with the might of a lion, carrying me by the neck like its cub. The door opened.

My dad stood there, wide eyed. Quickly, he pulled me into a hug. "Praise God. Praise God, my baby's home." He picked me up, carried me into the living room, shouting, "Marie, Marie, she's home. Our baby is home." When he put me down, I saw he was crying, but he had a huge smile on his face. "Katie, I love you. I'm sorry I hurt you. Let's start over again, okay?"

"Dad, I'm sorry for running away. I love you, too. I know you're gonna punish me, but I just—"

"Oh, Katie, I'm not going to punish you." He examined my face. "I think you've faced the consequences on your own, haven't you? I'm sure you have a heck of a story to tell."

I hugged him tight. "Yes, Dad." I missed him so much. I missed the way he smelled, the warmth of his body when I hugged him. Finally, I felt safe in my daddy's arms again.

"That's how life is, Kate. God doesn't punish us. The bad things we do result in bad consequences, all on their own. That was God's design. Do you see that?"

Tears fell from my eyes and onto his shoulders. "Yes, Dad, I see that."

"Good." He pulled away and faced me. "I did want to punish you. I wanted to kill you." He cupped his hands, turning his palms up. "With my bare hands." He laughed. "I had a lot of time to think. There was a reason you ran away. You were hurting and I didn't help you when you came to me. I made it worse."

I heard Jay clear her throat. When I looked up, I saw she had stepped forward. "Pastor North, this is actually my fault. I was the bad influence. I took her down there and..."

My dad pulled Jay into a hug, "And you brought her home. Thank you for bringing her home." Dad let go, and closed the front door. He gestured for Jay to come in and sit.

Mom came down the stairs. She ran to me and hugged me. Her arms squeezed me so tightly, I struggled to breathe for a moment. "Oh, Katie, I love you, *mija*. Your father is afraid to kill you, but I'm not."

I couldn't tell if she was kidding or not. "I love you too, Mom." She pulled away from me. There were tears on her face. Her eyes were sunken with dark crescents underneath. Guilt settled on my chest. I was sure she stayed up many nights, crying and worrying.

"Come, sit, everyone," Dad was sitting in his chair, holding his arms out toward the couch.

Jay and I sat there. Jay started biting her thumb nail. Mom took a seat next to Dad.

The lines on Dad's face smoothed out. "I heard what happened at school. I heard you lost a friend." Silence followed as I held back my tears. Images of Emo came to mind, the sound of his laughter, and yes, I did cry. Dad came over and put his hand on my back. "Tell me about this friend of yours, and what happened exactly?"

"Well, Pastor North," Jay started biting her thumb nail. "Um, Emo was a friend of ours. He was gay. He was dating a popular guy, Kevin Green. No one knew about it except us. Well, one night, they got into a fight in public, and someone was watching it. They recorded it on their phone, uploaded it onto YouTube and Facebook. The whole school knew Kevin was gay. I guess Kevin thought Emo told everyone, but he didn't. So he shot Emo, then he shot himself in the head. Kevin is still alive. They say he's gonna make it. Emo..." Jay's voice cracked. She paused as she turned away, cleared her throat, and continued. "Emo's gone. His funeral was held the other day."

I couldn't believe that I'd missed his funeral. I was too busy worrying about my own issues.

Dad took me into his arms. "I know it hurts, baby. I'm so sorry this tragic thing has happened. Kids your age aren't supposed to go through this. This kind of grief is hard to deal with. I want you to know I'm here if you need to talk," he looked at Jay. "Both of you." There were a few silent moments. "Gathering from what I can see, this being gay thing is more complicated than I thought. I'm not sure what this is, Katie, but from now on, I'm going to listen to you more openly, and I want you to do the same."

"I will, Dad."

He observed my face again. "I won't pull you from public school, mostly because I think you need your friends right now, and your friends need you. But I do expect you to go through the program. I want you to promise me you won't shut me out. If there's a problem with it, let's talk about it. I want to guide you, but you have to show me how."

Dad paused and hung his head. "I can't stand the fact that I pushed you to run away. It's crazy to think what happened with these boys could have been you two," he glanced at Jay. "Please, promise me you'll talk to me if there's a problem. I promise I'll

listen this time. No running away. Deal?"

"Yes, Dad, I promise."

Dad turned to Jay. "As for you, Jay. I know you didn't mean to cause any trouble. I can tell you're a good kid. I don't think you're evil or anything like that. I want you to be my daughter's friend. However, I expect you to remain just friends. I want to trust you'll honor my wishes."

Jay looked down for a moment, and with a sad expression, back up at Dad. "I will, Pastor."

"Oh, and Jay, I'm here for you, too."

She bit her fingernail. "Thank you, Pastor."

From that moment on, Jay was even more distant. She didn't touch me or look in my eyes. Before she went home, she hugged me for half a second.

We were standing in the drive way, beside Jay's car. The light of the setting sun highlighted the sadness in her eyes. She peered down at her feet, and faked a smile. "Your dad's something else. I didn't know parents like that existed." She faked a laugh. "My dad would've killed me. Now I know why you love him so much." It was silent a moment. "So, just friends, huh?"

I let my tears fall. I didn't have the strength to hide them anymore. "Just friends."

When she turned back to me, she pulled me into a hug. "I'll always love you, Katie. I won't tell you or show you. Just remember I do." She pulled away, and I saw she let her tears go too. "Call me after your program. Later." I watched her get into her car. It was like someone had drilled a hole into my chest, allowing blood to gush out of the empty cavity. Jay gave me one last look. It was sad, yet hopeful. Then, she drove away with my broken and bloody heart.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Phoenix, Arizona

THE MAN STOOD on a high rise and addressed the crowd. "For the next four weeks, Camp Ex-gay is your home. The people in your cabins are your family." He wore the standard violet polo shirt with the camp logo on it. "My name is Pastor Leroy and I'm your head counselor." I thought it was ironic that the head of Camp Ex-gay looked like a total flamer. He reminded me of Emo. I quickly forced those thoughts out of my head.

We were in a pentagon-shaped auditorium. Everything was made of natural wood, the benches, the walls, ceiling and beams. The room was full of teens and young adults. Some looked like they could be in junior high, others in their twenties. Some people looked excited, others looked miserable. Everyone seemed unsure as to what was about to occur.

"Group with your cabin members. There are counselors alongside the walls with cabin numbers. Check your nametag for your cabin number, and find your counselor. He or she will take you to your cabin where you will unpack. I want you back in forty five minutes. At that time, we'll do a little praise and worship, some icebreaker exercises, and then dinner. Okay, so go ahead and find your counselor and be back here by 4:15." Leroy walked away as everyone started to break up.

I reached for the name tag hanging from a lanyard around my neck. My cabin number was printed on it. Sixteen. I looked up at the signs hanging above the camp counselors, and spotted my number. There were a few girls already gathered there. Here goes nothing.

I picked up my stuff and headed over to the curly-haired woman holding a clip board. She grinned as I approached. "Hi, I'm Kate-Lynn North."

The woman looked at her clipboard, made a check mark. "Kate-Lynn, you're in the right place."

"If you could call me Katie, that would be great." I put my stuff down.

The woman marked her clipboard. "Sure. I'm making a note of it right now." She locked eyes with me. "My name is Jen. I'm your counselor."

Someone walked up from behind me. "Hi, I'm Destiny, cabin sixteen." I turned my attention to the rest of my cabin mates as I

barely heard Jen say, "Destiny, you're in the right place."

Most of the girls in my cabin appeared shy and scared. Look brave Katie, I thought. As I surveyed the room, I remembered Emo telling me about gaydar. In case you don't know what gaydar is, it's the ability to recognize a gay person without being told they're gay. He said everyone has gaydar, they just have to be attuned. So I looked around the room, trying to see what my gaydar picked up.

I noticed a boy across the way. He had his back toward me, but he leaned most of his body weight into one hip. He placed his hand on his other hip. Gay. Good job, Katie. Let's see what else you've got.

I saw another boy. He was sitting on a bench with his head down. His bangs were long and draped over the side of his face, and he wore black nail polish. When he looked up, I saw that he was wearing eye-liner, and he'd been crying. He wiped his face with his hands, turned and shot his hand up into the air, moving his fingers in a wave. The way he did it was totally gay.

I spotted a girl in the group beside ours. She had her arms crossed, and she stood with her legs further apart than most girls do. I guess guys stand like that because they have, you know, testicles to make room for. She had a boy's hair cut, and she wore boy's clothes. Very, very gay.

I was distracted by an argument in my group. "What? It's just a bracelet." A brunette girl furrowed her eyebrows at the blonde standing in front of her.

"It's a symbol of your perversion. Why would you bring that here?" The blonde girl yelled.

"Shut up, you dumb slut."

"Enough." Jen, the counselor, stepped in. She looked at the brunette. "Name calling will not be tolerated." She turned to the blonde. "And we have no rules against rainbow jewelry." She turned back to the brunette in calm voice. "You can let go of it when you're ready."

The brunette nodded. "Thank you."

Great, I thought. We were only there for three minutes and already drama broke out. It's going to be a fun four weeks.

We went into the cabin. I was looking forward to choosing a bunk, when I saw they'd been assigned. There was a sign on a bottom bunk with my name on it. There were footlockers on either side of them. I started to unpack.

"What church are you from?" A red haired girl with glasses stood above me.

"Uh," I hesitated as I went through my suitcase. "One Love Church,"

The girl looked confused. "Is that in Phoenix?"

I glanced at her, and went back to my suitcase. "No, it's in Las Vegas. It's a seeker church."

"Oh."

I really didn't feel like talking to her, but I wanted to be polite. "Are you from Phoenix?"

"Yeah, it's boring here. I'm from an Assembly of God. I heard that—"

"Who are you talking to, Linda?" I turned and saw the blonde girl who was shouting earlier. "I hope you're not fraternizing." Then she walked away.

I laughed. "Who is she?"

Linda frowned. "That's Karen Wayne. She's the world's greatest Bible-thumper. She's also my friend."

"Really?"

Linda extended her hand. "I'm Linda, by the way. I just wanted to make a friend."

I took her hand. "Katie. You've made a friend."

Linda pointed toward the opposite corner of the room. "My bunk is over there. Don't be a stranger."

"Rad. I won't."

As I finished unpacking and organizing my footlocker, another girl quickly climbed over my bed and jumped on the top bunk. A few moments later, her head popped upside-down from there. "Hi." She had a high energy level. I liked that. "Hey."

She had long curly hair. "Name's Amanda."

"Katie."

"Welcome to camp denial, Katie, where it's cool to look gay, act gay, and wear gay purple shirts, as long as you don't admit being gay."

I laughed. "You think it's all just a joke, then?"

"Hell, yeah. This is so gay." Her hair fell in her face and she pulled herself back onto the bunk. "I'm only here 'cause I have to be." She jumped down. "My parents were so cool until they saw the light," she lifted her hand toward the ceiling, "hallelujah."

I laughed.

Amanda grimaced as she brought her arm down and sat on my bed. "Then, all of a sudden, I'm forced to go to church, say my prayers, and stop wearing hoochie-mama clothes. You know, I don't know much about this Jesus character, but I hope he isn't as lame as they make him out to be."

I shook my head. "He isn't. He's actually really awesome, but you don't really know it until you experience him yourself."

She seemed a little disappointed. "You think this ex-gay thing is for real?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I think God has the power to change

people, the question is, would he? Should he? It all comes down to the question, is it a choice or is it natural? If it's natural, why would God want to change us?"

"You seem pretty liberal. That gives me hope. I don't look forward to being brainwashed."

"Then, let's not get brainwashed. Let's check each other if it seems like we're getting brainwashed." I held out my hand. "Deal?"

Amanda took my hand. "Sounds good."

I heard Jen's voice. "Okay, cabin sixteen. Let's make our way to the Center Pavilion."

Amanda and I locked eyes. "Let's do it."

PASTOR LEYROY WAS walking around the Center Pavilion. "Look into the person's eyes." All the campers crowded the room. Amanda and I were standing about a foot apart, facing each other. We were instructed to pick a partner and listen for Pastor Leroy's prompts.

I stared into Amanda's dark brown eyes.

"Try to see deep into their soul," Pastor Leroy said.

Amanda almost laughed out loud, as she quickly covered her mouth with her hands. Amanda came off as a free-spirit. I could imagine us becoming friends.

Deep into her soul, I thought. I wasn't sure about what I "saw," but I felt Amanda was frustrated, and she was trying to hide it. Maybe it was because her parents had met Christ and she was struggling with the change. Maybe it was because she didn't believe in God, and she was tired of fighting the nagging possibility God might indeed exist. Or, maybe she was just tired. I didn't know.

"Now," Pastor Leroy went on, "I want you to take a step closer to your partner, and give that person a big hug. Hug that person tight, and pray they might open their hearts to God."

Amanda's eyebrows went up as she reluctantly came closer to me. I took her into my arms. I didn't mind hugging.

Amanda smelled like peppermint. She was tense. "This is weird."

"Yeah," I replied.

There was silence.

"Okay," Pastor Leroy came around again. "You can let go if you want but feel free to hold each other a little longer if you'd like."

Amanda and I let go of each other and stepped back.

"Now, I want you to tell your partner why you're here."

Amanda started. "You already know. My parents made me come here because I'm gay and they don't like it."

"I'm here because I'm a Christian and I'm gay. I know I can't be both, so I choose to be straight."

"You really think it's that simple?" Amanda asked.

I chuckled. "There's nothing simple about it. If I could choose to be straight, I'd have done it a long time ago."

"But you think these people can make you straight?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I guess it's my hope."

Amanda raised her finger to her forehead. "Think about it. If anyone was going to give therapy that actually works, wouldn't it be psychologists? Not churches?"

I nodded in agreement. "You have a point. How do you know this isn't based on psychological theories?"

"It probably is, but that doesn't mean it works. I mean —"

"Okay," Pastor Leroy interrupted. "Good job, everyone. I hope you enjoyed that exercise because throughout the program, you'll be participating in exercises such as these. I hope you're prepared to get personal with your cabin mates. The first week of the program will be dedicated to creating a sense of family within your cabin. Get to know your family."

"You'll meet here at the Center Pavilion, as a camp, once a week. You'll spend the rest of your time with your cabin, and you'll eat in groups. Once I dismiss you, your cabin leader will instruct you throughout the week. Good luck, campers and see you in week. You're dismissed."

Immediately, the pavilion was filled with noise. "Cabin sixteen." Jen hollered. "Everyone meet at the cabin."

In front of our cabin there was a circular bench. The eight of us, plus Jen, sat on it, facing inward. "Okay." Jen beamed at us. "I'm going to introduce myself and tell you why I'm here. Then I want y'all to do the same. Okay?"

"Sure,"

"Okay."

"My name is Jen. I'm an ex-gay minister. I used to be a lesbian, but God delivered me and I've chosen to take up my calling to help others conquer same-sex attractions. I'm really glad to be here." Jen looked at the blonde next to her.

"Hi, I'm Karen. I'm here because being gay is disgusting and I don't wanna be gay anymore." Karen twirled her hair in her fingers.

Linda adjusted her glasses. "My name is Linda. I'm here because I love Jesus."

A brown-skinned girl with short hair waved at the group. "Hi, I'm Destiny. I'm Catholic so I don't fit in that much."

"Sure you do," Jen said.

"Well," Destiny went on. "I'm definitely a lesbian, and I'm not supposed to be. That's why I'm here." Destiny turned to another brunette girl, the one with the rainbow bracelet.

"Uh, my name is Keisha. I'm gay and I like being gay, but I'm not fond of eternal lakes of fire. That's why I'm here."

Amanda laughed. "Oh, um. My name is Amanda. I'm here because my parents made me." Suddenly, all eyes were on me.

I was nervous. "Hey, everyone. My name is Katie. I'm here because I'm choosing God over my love life."

"That's great, cabin sixteen. It's nice to meet y'all" Jen said. "Breakfast is at 7:30 a.m.. There's a schedule posted on the cabin bulletin for counseling. Each day you'll come and have a private session in my office so I can track your progress. Tomorrow's session begins right after breakfast."

My first session went well, I thought.

I OPENED THE door to the office and saw Jen sitting at her desk. The furniture was nice, but white walls made the room seem cold. Jen moved toward a pair of seats. It reminded me of the chairs in Dad's office. "Hi."

"Hi, Katie, please sit." We both took our seats. "How do you like it here?"

"I don't know. I haven't been here long enough to say."

She folded her hands together. "Okay, tell me why you're here."

"Because I'm gay, and Pastor Phil is my dad."

"Wait," she looked away. "You mean Pastor Philip North?"

"Yeah." I wasn't surprised he was known here. "That's my dad."

Her eyes lit up. "Wow. You know, I met your dad at a retreat in Tucson. He's very strong in the Lord. How is his church doing?"

"Still growing."

"Oh I bet." A moment of silence passed as she stared away, dreamy eyed. I really didn't want to know what she was thinking. "I'm sorry," she turned back to me, "we're supposed to be talking about you."

"It's okay."

Jen observed me closely. "You say you're gay."

"Yup."

She leaned forward in her seat. "Katie, what you have to understand is that you aren't gay. There's no such thing as gay. God made you the right way. What we're dealing with is a demon deceiving you to think gay is an identity, and it's your identity."

"A demon?"

"Yes."

I pressed my lips together. I wasn't satisfied with her answer. "Um, so you're saying a demon is what is causing me to see beauty in another female?"

Jen shook her head. "No, God is allowing you to see beauty, Katie. God allows you to love your friends, but the sexual attraction comes from the devil."

I thought about it a moment. "Isn't sexual attraction part of being in love with someone?"

Jen pointed her finger up. "Yes, but only male and female can truly be in love this way, Katie. According to the scriptures, this is God's design. Anything other than God's design is Satan's. Do you understand that?"

"Um," I looked around the room as my thoughts ran around in my head. "I understand your logic, but there seems to be a fallacy somewhere. The part that doesn't make sense is —"

Jen shot me an impatient look. "Don't you want to be delivered from homosexuality?"

"Well, yeah. But, all this needs to make sense in my head."

She leaned in closer. "Why, Katie? We walk by faith, not by sight. The Word says, 'lean not onto thine own understanding.'"

"Yes, I know that. I think there's value in accepting things you don't understand, but this doesn't seem like a mystical concept here. It seems like a matter of biology or psychology or both. God made me intelligent so I could ask questions."

Jen pressed her lips together. I sensed frustration. "I'm sorry, Katie. I don't believe you're right on this one. It seems as if your flesh is fighting with you."

My eyebrows scrunched up. "Maybe it is, but I still want to understand."

Jen leaned forward and looked me in the eyes. "Understand that homosexuals will not inherit the Kingdom of God. Do you believe in the Bible?"

"Yes."

"All of it?"

I hesitated. "I'm not sure, but that doesn't mean I don't love God or I don't want to be straight. It just means that it doesn't all make sense to me. I believe in the Bible, but I also believe in science. I believe in a 4.6 billion year-old solar system. I believe in evolution. I believe my heart knows the difference between good and evil."

"Your beliefs conflict." Jen's eyes studied me. It felt partly condescending, and partly concerned.

"Exactly. It doesn't make sense, which means there's missing

information."

Jen took my hands into hers, and stared intensely in my eyes. "Your mind is taking you down a dark path, Katie."

I pulled my hands away. "My mind was created by God. He gave me intelligence so I can think and ask questions."

"Okay," she got up, went to her desk, opened a folder and started jotting some notes. "Katie, I want you to read the first chapter of Romans."

My chest became heavy. Why did it feel like I did something wrong? I didn't know how to respond. "Okay."

"I'll see you tomorrow, Katie."

AT LUNCH I sat with Keisha, the girl with the rainbow bracelet. We were in the cafeteria. It was somewhat rowdy, but only a portion of the campers were there, since we ate in shifts. "Like, I don't know, I wanna be gay," Keisha said. "But, I wanna go to Heaven too. So, I just do what they say and hope it works. Beats Hell, Katie."

I stabbed a piece of bread with my plastic fork, thinking of Jay. "Did you have a girlfriend before you came here?"

"Still do."

I looked up, surprised. "If you're still with her, why are you here?"

Keisha shrugged her shoulders. "It's part of the test. If I do everything these people say, and they can make me straight, then I'll see the light and realize I was never in love with Brandy. But, if I'm still in love with her when we get outta here, that means this whole ex-gay thing is bogus."

"That's smart."

Keisha shrugged again. "Yeah, I know. But, I really wanna get to Heaven. That's why I'm really gonna try. My girlfriend is convinced this whole thing is a massive conspiracy to get the Tea Party freaks to take over the world. I don't know, something like that. I don't care about politics. But I told her I don't wanna go to Hell, so I have to see for myself. That's when she proposed the test."

I picked up the bread and ripped it with my hands. "Is she afraid she might be wrong?"

Keisha finished her spaghetti and started on her sliced peaches. "I think deep down there is fear, but she doesn't show it." It was quiet for a moment. "What about you? Any girls?"

"Yeah, there's Jay. But we're just friends now. I think she hates me."

Keisha paused and glanced up at me. "Aw. Why?"

"I told her I wanted to be 'good for God' and there was a guy that, I don't know, I might like?"

"Ouch." She started eating again. "So, you're bi?"

"I don't know. I like Marc. He's a great guy. He's funny, cute, and I trust him. I feel safe with him. We're like best friends. I wanna be in love with him, but I'm not. If this program makes me straight, maybe he'll be that special guy, you know?"

"It's so sad."

"What is?" I started to twirl the spaghetti with my fork, although I had no intention of eating it.

"That we can't be with the people we love. Love is so scarce in this world. It's sad that we can't love the people we love."

"What about the idea that it isn't real love?"

Keisha shrugged. "I don't know. I guess I don't know enough about love to decide. I'm really coming in with an opened mind."

"That's good."

It was silent for a few moments. "You know that blonde girl who went psycho on me yesterday because of my bracelet?"

"Yeah, Karen something?"

"Yeah, she used go to my school. She was expelled because she was caught sucking some guy's dick in the boy's bathroom."

I put my fork down. "Gross. So she isn't gay?"

Keisha shook her head and finished her peaches. "No, I think she's just a slut. She told everyone she was gay, and she made out with girls in school, but just to call attention to her sluttyness. I heard she slept with the entire football team."

"Wow."

Keisha laughed. "Yeah, don't say anything."

"I won't." I whirled around as I heard someone approaching.

Amanda took a seat beside me. "Was sup, guys?" She placed her lunch tray down. "The spaghetti looks kinda crazy. Is it normal to put American cheese on spaghetti?"

I looked down at my food and chuckled. "It's not."

"It's good, though," Keisha said.

I stabbed at my spaghetti. Maybe I should've been eating, but I just couldn't find an appetite.

Amanda chewed with her mouth full. "Mmm hmm. It's good." It was silent a moment. "What do you guys think of those chicks who dress like dudes?" Amanda darted her eyes toward the masculine girl who I spotted the night before. The girl had a boy's haircut, and was wearing jeans, boots, and a T-shirt. She was sitting at a table by herself, eating.

Keisha glanced over her shoulder. "You mean studs? She's cute."

"What are they called?" I asked.

"Studs," Keisha replied.

"Yeah but," Amanda opened her carton of milk. "If I wanted to go out with a guy, wouldn't I just go out with a guy?"

Keisha peered over her shoulder again. "Yeah, but she's not a guy. She's a stud. My girlfriend's a stud. I don't want a guy. I want a girl who can handle things, you know? Fix toasters and kill insects. I'm too girly to do stuff like that. It's like she compliments my feminine side."

Amanda shrugged. "I guess. I'm not afraid of bugs." It was silent a few moments. Amanda elbowed me gently. "You're quiet."

I sighed. "I know. I guess I just have a lot on my mind. I can't decide what I'm doing here."

Amanda laughed. "Getting brainwashed already?"

I glanced at Keisha. "It just seems like Jen doesn't like that I ask questions, and she sure can't answer them either."

"What kinda questions?" Keisha took a sip of her orange juice.

"Well, I question the Bible. I want to say I believe in the whole Bible, but what about all the evidence that shows our world is way older? Am I supposed to ignore that?"

"I wouldn't," Amanda said.

"Well, what about faith?" Keisha asked. "Aren't we supposed to just trust God when things don't make sense?"

I thought a moment. It is common wisdom among Christians to walk by faith and not by sight. "Why should faith be blind? If God gave us eyes to see, why do we have to walk blindly?"

Amanda said, "If God gave us eyes, why would the church want us to close them?"

Keisha put her carton down and sighed in frustration. "We're not supposed to use our eyes. Look, if we don't believe in the whole Bible, how are we supposed to know what to believe and what not to believe?"

Amanda shrugged.

"Um, I don't know." I was suddenly frustrated. When things don't make sense, I always assume there's missing information. "If my dad were here, he would say we're treading on dangerous ground. He says God wants us to ask questions, but beware of the answers." My comment must have been thought provoking, because the three of us were quiet for the rest of the meal.

"GOOD AFTERNOON, CABIN sixteen." Jen was sitting on the bench outside our cabin. Everyone gathered around. "Right now, I want to begin a new exercise. In order to get to a place where we can be open enough to experience healing, we have to take down the walls that guard our hearts. One of the biggest fears we have, as

individuals in a large society, is making a fool of ourselves. Did you know the most common fear in America is public speaking? Well, we're going get over that by cutting to the chase. We're going to walk over to the field and make the biggest fools of ourselves as we possibly can. That way we won't fear it anymore. Y'all in?"

"Yeah,"

"Really?"

"Ugh."

"Let's do it."

"Okay let's walk on over."

We were in a green field, standing in a circle. Jen was in the center. "This isn't a time to be cool. Cool people have to act cool all the time, and that's not fun. When you allow yourself to be a total dork, the fun begins. Girls, I want to see the dork in you."

"Omigosh."

"Oh... kay."

"I'm down."

The nine of us sang silly songs while dancing like children – completely off beat but totally fun. It served its purpose. After the activity, we were more relaxed and outgoing. For the next week, we did various exercises that made us more and more comfortable with each other. They were fun.

At the end of the week, the entire camp had an assembly.

The speaker read from his Bible. He introduced himself as Harry. "They became inflamed with lust for one another." He surveyed the audience. "Can anyone here relate to that? Raise your hand if you relate to it."

I saw some girls, but mostly guys, raise their hands. I thought of Jay. Sure there was a little bit of lust, but that came later, and we sure weren't "inflamed." Was that where the term flaming came from?

A dark skinned kid came onto the stage and took the mic. "I was once inflamed with lust. All I thought about was men. I wanted to sleep with them, all the time. I dreamed about gay sex at night. It was perverse, but Christ delivered me."

The speaker took the mic. "Praise God!" He paused and pointed to someone in the crowd.

I turned around as I heard a girl's voice. "Aren't all guys like that? I mean, don't straight guys think about sex, twenty-four/seven too?" The crowd laughed.

The speaker said, "No, not all guys are like that. However, a preoccupation with sex is normal for adolescent boys. The problem is when we act on these sexual impulses, and yes, premarital sex is wrong for straight guys, too. Remember, God wants us to be pure. He holds everyone to the same standard.

"Now, I want you guys to think of the last time you were inflamed with lust for someone of the same sex. Close your eyes and recall what you were thinking."

I closed my eyes and imagined Jay and I, sitting on the beach. We were crying over Emo, and then we were crying because we were breaking up. I was thinking of how I'd never get to kiss her again, never be with her. Warm tears streamed down my face, as the pain stung my heart. God, I love Jay.

When I opened my eyes, Keisha threw her arms around me, and was crying too. "Katie, I love her. It really feels like I love her."

I turned and saw Jen come in and she put her arms around the both of us. "It isn't love," Jen said. "Say it with me. It isn't love."

I was hesitant to repeat the words, because I wasn't sure I believed it. My heart fought, my mind fought, but it was useless. I was tired. The heartache that came with the thought of Jay Miller depressed me, and I had no energy. By the third time Jen and Keisha repeated the words, I had joined in. "It isn't love."

Chapter Twenty-eight

"KATIE," AMANDA WHISPERED as she elbowed me. I looked up. We, the entire cabin, were sitting around a fire pit. The benches were logs cut in half. It was day time. The air was warm. We were talking and reading out of the Bible. I was getting lost within myself.

I felt so confused. A big part of me knew God wanted me to be straight. However, the other part of me screamed out, saying I was in love with Jay, and none of this made sense. I felt as if I were literally pulled apart. My heart was being torn from my spirit, and my spirit from my soul. It felt like my heart, which yearned to love Jay, was hated by God. They say God doesn't hate us, just our sin. Yet, as I love Jay, it feels like God hates my heart, because my sin comes from my heart. My emotions didn't match the logic they presented, but my fears took me down its path. I felt as if I was losing myself. It was scary.

"Katie, it's your turn," Amanda whispered again. I glanced at my cabin mates. No one really showed signs that they were thinking the same thing. I looked down at the opened Bible in my hands, and up at the counselor.

Jen pointed at me. "If you could read verse nine, Katie."

I returned my eyes to the book, cleared my throat and began to read. "Do not be deceived: neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the Kingdom of God."

"Thank you, Katie," Jen said. "Now you see how God has put homosexuality next to all these terrible sins? Why did he do that?"

"Because it's wrong," Karen said.

"That's right," Jen replied.

"Amen,"

Jen continued. "People don't like to talk about going to Hell. The Word says we shouldn't judge those outside the church, but we should correct our brothers and sisters in Christ. Although it might seem rude to tell people they're going to Hell, it's good to speak the truth among fellow Christians.

"Now think about the verse Katie just read. Essentially, what is it saying?"

"That we're going to Hell," Karen said.

Jen grasped her Bible with both hands. "Those who are born

again experience God's grace. Therefore, we who know Jesus aren't going to Hell. However, it's important to realize homosexuality is punishable under God's wrath." Jen paused and took a good look at the group. "Someone read Genesis 19:24. Linda?"

Linda nervously turned the pages of her book. She adjusted her glasses. "Then the Lord rained down fire and burning sulfur from the sky on Sodom and Gomorrah."

"That's intense," Keisha said.

"Sounds like Hell,"

"God hates us."

"No." Jen laughed. "God does not hate you, silly. He hates your sin. The good news is that Christ has come to redeem us. Christ said to the adulterous woman, 'Go and sin no more.' Christ wants to change us, but we need to be humble and accept that God hates homosexuality."

"But if we can't change," Amanda pointed out, "if it's impossible to separate the sin from the sinner, the message being sent is God hates us."

Jen placed her hands on her lap. Her expression was content. "Amanda, you can change. Does anyone remember the story of Zaccheaus?"

"Yeah," Destiny said.

Jen turned to me. "Katie, do you remember what happened to Zaccheaus?"

I hesitated to answer, but saw everyone staring at me. I took a moment to recall the story. "Zaccheaus was a traitor and crook. He turned his back on his people, the Jews. He robbed them by demanding extra taxes, which he pocketed, in the name of the Roman government. The Jews had to submit to him. They despised him.

"When Jesus came through, Zaccheaus climbed a tree so he could see Jesus. I guess that got Jesus' attention, because he invited himself to have dinner at Zaccheaus' house. In that moment, Zaccheaus was transformed. He vowed to give half of his possessions to the poor, and to give back four times as much as he had stolen from the people."

Jen beamed at me. "Very good, and what transformed Zaccheaus?"

I looked around again. "It was the grace of God. It was Zaccheaus' own humility. Knowing he was a corrupt tax collector, and feeling he wasn't worthy of Jesus' time, and seeing that Christ wanted to be his guest regardless of how bad he was... it, it touched him. It touched him to the point of transformation."

"Good answer, Katie. You're as sharp as your father."

I looked around and saw everyone with puzzled looks on their faces. No doubt they wondered who my dad was. "Thank you."

Jen winked at me, and turned to the group. "The story of Zaccheaus is a perfect example of how God's grace transforms people. He doesn't want to send anyone to Hell. Instead, he wants us to experience his grace. God hates homosexuality. God loves all of us. In order to experience his grace, we have to be humble, like Zaccheaus, knowing we're wrong. Does everyone understand that?"

"Yeah,"

"Makes sense," Linda said.

"I have a question." Keisha raised her hand. "What if we know being gay is wrong, but we don't feel like it's wrong? Will we still experience grace?"

"If you trust God, you will. Our emotions aren't trustworthy. A lot of bad things feel good. Can y'all name some?"

"Sex," Karen said.

"Alcohol,"

"Stealing,"

"Stealing? You're a thief?" Karen asked.

"Uh, yeah," Amanda gave a sarcastic look. "Have you ever shoplifted? It's a rush."

"Chocolate cake."

"What?"

"It's bad when you're trying to lose weight," Linda said.

"Or you're anorexic," Karen said.

"Sex."

"That was said already," Karen said.

Jen held out her arms, quieting the group. "The point is, Keisha, if we trust God, despite our feelings, we're in for a blessing." Jen looked around the circle. "Now is everyone ready to accept that homosexuality is a sin?"

I saw some girls who were quick to say, "Yes," others hesitated or just nodded their heads. Although I'm usually a leader, I was reluctant to answer. Amanda and I glanced at each other. I wanted to see what would happen next, so I said, "Yes." Amanda remained silent.

"Good. We're taking a break now, but I want us to be in heavy prayer tonight. Tomorrow we're going to repent of our sins. We need to prepare our hearts, and to fight thoughts from Satan. We're in spiritual warfare now. The devil wants to convince you that you're wrong about this."

I felt an aching in my chest. "What if we are?"

Jen's mouth opened for a moment, but she recomposed herself quickly. "Katie, you need prayer. After I dismiss the group, I'm

going to ask you to come to my office and we can talk some more, okay?"

I didn't want to talk. I was already exhausted enough to go to sleep. But, no one appeared as tired as me. They looked energetic and somewhat happy. As the group started to break up, I turned to Keisha. "How are you taking all this?"

Keisha shrugged. "The plan was to cooperate, Katie. I don't think you're cooperating, but that's up to you. I just know I'm supposed to cooperate."

Amanda's eyebrows went up. "I'm not taking any of this. It's a bunch of bull."

Keisha shook her head and walked away.

I placed my hand on Amanda's shoulder. "I guess I have a special session. See you later."

JEN AND I were in her cold office again. "Katie, I need you to understand that I'm responsible for all of our cabin members, and I can't have you influencing them. It's clear to me you're flesh is fighting, and you're going to need special treatment."

"What special treatment?"

Jen pressed her lips together. "I want to move you into a private room. That way, you have time alone to spend with God. It's crucial you pray, pray, and pray some more, Katie. We want you to get through this. Sometimes the best way is to be alone with God."

I heard a knock on the door.

"Come on in." Jen leaned back in her seat as some counselors walked in. They shut the door behind them. "Katie, you know Pastor Leroy and Harry, and Ruth." Everyone took their seats. "Now, Katie, can you explain to us what you're dealing with? Why is it so hard to accept being gay is wrong?"

I looked around the room. "It's not that I can't accept it. I just think it should make sense. So far, it isn't making sense."

Pastor Leroy was leaning forward in his seat, with his hands folded. "You believe in God. Does God make sense?"

I answered. "Yes. God makes sense to me."

Leroy's expression was hard to read. "Do you have proof in God?"

I thought a moment. "Not scientific proof. I don't need scientific proof to believe in God. I see beauty and feel love. I feel his presence when I pray and worship. That makes sense to me."

The counselors exchanged glances.

"Katie," Pastor Leroy said, "the Bible clearly states homosexuality is wrong. Do you believe in the Bible?"

I sighed in frustration. "Jen and I went over this. I believe in the Bible. I believe in God, but some of it's wrong. Our solar system is 4.6 billion years old. There's no way it's only five thousand, or it was created in seven days. I won't disregard scientific evidence."

Ruth spoke next. "Katie, if science disproves the Bible, it's evil and completely untrue."

I turned away, frustrated. "You all believe science is irrelevant?"

Jen replied. "Katie, we believe in the Bible, not science."

Ah. These people are so unreasonable. I glanced at the PC on Jen's desk, and turned to her. "Jen, your computer operates on scientific principles." I turned to Leroy. "Your cell phones, your cars, basic household plumbing, and every invention you can think of, is based on scientific laws. You can't just dismiss science when it conflicts with your beliefs. If you want to know the truth, you have to consider it all."

Harry cleared his throat. "I know it's scientifically proven you can't be born gay."

"What?" I was appalled by his statement. "I don't know who told you that, but it's untrue. The nature verses nurture debate will probably never be settled. You should seriously go to a library and get your facts straight before saying stuff like that."

Leroy stood. "Katie, we're very disappointed in you. Perhaps an exorcism is in order." Harry and Ruth stood also.

"What? Are you kidding me? You think I'm demon possessed?"

Jen stood up. "I'll take it from here, y'all. She has a private room."

Harry pointed at me. "Tell your subject to mind her elders, and the Word of God. We don't want her to end up in Hell." They left.

Jen sat with me. She was upset. "Katie, I apologize for them. Maybe I shouldn't have involved them. They're harsh. They don't understand. I know you're a very intelligent girl. You get it from your father. What you lack though, is wisdom. Sometimes it's good to use your brain. Other times it's better to trust God."

I shook my head. "This is what you don't get. I do trust God. That's why I'm here. I happen to love God. I happen to want to please him and walk with him and go to Heaven. I'm not trying to disprove the Bible. I'm just trying to learn the truth. I don't understand why everyone is so threatened by that. God wants us to seek the truth. That's all I'm doing."

"Katie, the truth is simple here. It's clearly stated in the Bible."

I shifted away, unsatisfied with her response. I turned back. "I know. Still, I need more than that. I don't need scientific proof. I don't need to witness a miracle. I just need for it to make

sense somehow.”

“Okay.” Jen started writing in her notebook again. “Go back to your cabin and gather your things. Come back and I’ll show you to your private cabin.”

I didn’t understand why they pushed me so hard. It wasn’t about homosexuality anymore. It wasn’t about science or the Bible. It was about the fact that I was being punished for asking questions. I was preoccupied with the sudden awareness these ex-gay people, with all their doctrine, were threatened by my free-thinking. It felt as if they were afraid of me.

Chapter Twenty-nine

ISOLATION SUCKED. I sat alone in a room where I could pray. Sometimes God spoke to me, but most of the time he was silent. I had my sessions with Jen, but they never got anywhere. She kept referring to the Bible and I kept explaining I needed a little more than biblical text. We were going in circles and I was going insane.

I was lying on my bed in the dark, wondering what Keisha and Amanda were doing. I wished I could talk to them. "God, what's going on?" I prayed aloud. "I'm confused. I wish I had someone to talk to."

The message in my heart: You can talk to me.

"Something is wrong with what these people are saying. Can you tell me the truth?"

That would be too easy.

"I don't know if you noticed it, but I've had enough with difficult. This whole thing has been difficult. Sometimes I get so mad at you, and I wanna push you away, but I really don't want you to leave."

I'm always here, even when you want me to leave.

"I want to speak to you."

What would you like to talk about?

"Jay. I love her, God. It feels like real love. Is it?"

What is false love?

"I don't know. You're God. Aren't you supposed to know everything?"

Maybe. I'm asking you, though. What's false love?

"When you're infatuated with someone and you think it's love."

What's infatuation?

"I'm not sure."

If I gave you a textbook definition of infatuation, would you be able to recognize the feeling?

"Probably not."

If a blind person came to you and asked you to describe the beauty of a sunset, could you, with words, paint such a picture?

"A million words couldn't do that."

Likewise, Katie, all the words in the world cannot tell you what real love is. And if your teacher gave you all the answers to your homework, would you learn?

"Absolutely not."

You have everything you need to realize the truth.

"I love Jay."

Is that a question or a statement?

"It's a statement. Jen says it isn't real. Your Word says it isn't real. Is it?"

Do you get the feeling this conversation is going in circles?

"I'm sorry. I just really want to know."

You really will know.

"What do I have to do to find out?"

What do you think you have to do?

"Read your word?"

What does my word say?

"That it's wrong."

And you aren't satisfied with that answer?

"Not really."

Why not?

"Because it doesn't make sense. If I understand the nature of God, um, your nature, then I know you wouldn't forbid me from loving Jay. Everyone is saying it isn't real love, but my heart says it is. How can this feeling come from the devil? It's good. It's unselfish. It feels like a gift from you. I can't find the evil in it."

But my word says it's evil. Why do you question my word?

"Because it's questionable. The world wasn't created in seven days. I can't dismiss science. I won't. Also, there are concepts which contradict each other. Moses said, 'An eye for an eye,' but Christ said to turn your cheek. Paul compiles a list of people whom are destined for Hell, and yet Christ says only to confess with your mouth and believe in your heart. Paul commands the women to be silent, but Jesus treated women as equals. That doesn't mean I can pick and choose which commandments to obey, it only means I should question everything I read. Isn't it good to ask questions, so I won't be deceived?"

There was silence.

"Hello? Aren't you going to answer me? That was a very important question."

Silence.

"Ugh. You drive me crazy."

Silence.

I lay there frustrated. I couldn't stand when God was silent when I needed answers most. I heard a knock at the door. I assumed it was Jen, because she was the only one to visit me. When I opened it, Keisha pushed her way in. "Sorry, Katie. I'm not supposed to be here, but I had to see if you were okay."

I shut the door. "Yeah? I'm glad you're here. I've been going crazy by myself."

Keisha noticed the condition of my dusty room. "What's solitude like?"

"Well, let's see. I eat by myself. I sleep by myself. The only person I talk to is Jen, although I've been praying a lot. I guess that was the objective of the isolation, to get me to pray."

Keisha took a seat on my bed. "Have you been dreaming of sex?"

"Huh? No." I sat beside her, and lay on my back.

"Katie, I've been having these crazy dreams of lesbian sex. All I see are these women in like this massive orgy. I keep looking for Brandy, but she's not there. I don't understand. Why am I having these dreams?"

I stared at the bottom side of the top bunk. "I don't know."

Keisha turned and leaned her back against the headboard. "You mean, you aren't having them?"

"No." I rolled over to face her.

"It's like I accepted lesbian sex is perverted, and now, it's really perverted. I feel like a sex maniac. I'm not normally like this."

I thought a moment. "Well, what's been going on? What have you guys been doing?"

Keisha started talking with her hands. "Well, we did this little ceremony where we repented and were re-baptized. Then we started touch therapy."

"Touch therapy?"

"Yeah. It's based on the idea that we need non-sexual, same-sex touching. Jen says we've, oh what's the word? Eroticized a need for same-sex touching, and if we touch each other in non-sexual ways, like hugging, then we'll be healed."

I sat up. "Interesting theory. Is it working?"

"I like touch therapy. It feels good. I don't know if it's working, but I know I've never dreamed of sex before. I don't know. I'm afraid to tell Jen about the dreams because I think she might, I mean, I don't wanna be in a private cabin."

"Me neither."

Keisha turned to face me. "Why don't you just do what they say, Katie? You won't have to be alone, and we can help each other. You're the only person in our cabin that's like, sane. I don't think Amanda likes me. Please come back, Katie. Just tell her you'll cooperate, even if you won't. I know it's lying, but that's better than being locked up all alone, right?"

I took a deep breath as I let her words echo in my mind. I didn't want to be isolated anymore.

I WAS IN Jen's office, sitting in front of her desk. "What made you change your mind?" She asked.

"Um, well, I've been praying and God kind of showed me the only way to get the answers to my questions is to cooperate. Plus, I don't wanna be alone anymore. I miss my cabin members."

Jen gave an approving nod. "You've made the right choice, Katie. I'm glad to bring you back to the group. Just go on and pack and—"

"Oh, I've already packed. My stuff is outside."

"Okay. Go ahead and put your stuff in the cabin and you can join your cabin mates for praise and worship. They're in the auditorium."

"Thanks, Jen."

I could hear the bass bumping as I walked toward the auditorium. The band must've been rocking out. That's just what I needed. Music, people, and dancing. Everyone was jumping, dancing, singing, and raising their hands toward Heaven. Best of all, my song was playing.

I am a friend of God

I am a friend of God

I am a friend of God

He calls me friend

I was doing cartwheels in my heart by the time they sung the last line. The energy was high and I was filled with joy. No words could describe the feeling. Whenever I was in worship, and I focused on God, the whole world got tuned out, even my own heartache. During worship, all I felt was joy, peace, and love. It was amazing.

As I moved toward my cabin mates, I spotted Keisha and went toward her. I put my hand on her shoulder. She spun around and hugged me. "Yay, Katie! I missed you."

"Me too, I'm so glad to be back. Thanks so much for the good advice."

"Anytime, my friend."

I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was Amanda.

"It's about time!" She shouted.

I hugged her. "It is." I turned my attention toward Heaven. Thank you, for everything.

JEN STOOD IN front of the group. "Okay, Cabin sixteen. You know what to do." We were in a living room. There was your typical living room furniture. It was the "therapy room." Jen turned to me. "Work with Keisha and Amanda, they'll tell you what to do, Katie."

I watched Amanda and Keisha. They were standing next to a recliner. I stepped over as Amanda took a seat. "This is kinda weird, Katie. You have to sit in my lap."

I laughed. "What?"

"Yeah. I'm supposed to be your mom. I have to hug you and make you feel loved. It's dumb, I know."

I shrugged my shoulders. "Okay." I reluctantly climbed onto Amanda's lap. She put her arms around me.

"Close your eyes, Katie," Keisha said.

I shut my eyes and tried to relax. I felt Amanda's energy. It was nice and warm. I could see how some people would think it's weird, but it didn't feel weird.

"Okay, now switch," Jen said.

A minute later, I was sitting in the recliner, with Keisha on my lap and in my arms. Keisha felt content, and I felt love for her. It was a sisterly love.

We did this exercise everyday for a week.

WE WERE IN the field again a few days later. It was a bright day.

"Katie, tell us about your relationship with your mom." Jen placed her hands on her lap and waited for me.

"Well, my mom's name is Marie. She's Mexican. She speaks Spanish, and she makes the best *enchiladas* on the face of the earth." Everyone laughed.

"Would you say you identify with your mom or dad?" Jen asked.

I thought a moment. "I love my mom, but I'm closer to my dad. I identify with my dad more because my mom is soft-spoken. She's keeps her opinions to herself and, well, I guess I have so much to say, like Dad. I can't imagine being as submissive as my mom."

"Did you spend much time with her growing up?" Jen asked.

I thought a moment. "I spent time with her, yeah. Not much time though. She taught me girl stuff, but I was a tomboy when I was a kid. I always wanted to be like Dad."

Jen asked. "Would you say you were disconnected from your mom?"

"No not disconnected, but if you compare it to my relationship with Dad, then yeah."

"Hear that, cabin sixteen?" Jen asked.

The group answered, "Yes."

I asked. "What's mom have anything to do with it?"

Jen locked eyes with me. "Katie, the reason you feel gay is because of this disconnection from your mother. You needed to

spend time with your mom. Your need for same-sex contact has become eroticized. Does that make sense?"

"Um... are you saying I'm attracted to the same-sex because I lacked physical attention from my mom?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying."

I thought a moment. The concept was oddly familiar. I recalled Freud's psychosexual stages. "You're saying I needed some kind of physical stimulation from my mom?"

"Yes,"

"Now, as an adult, I seek stimulation from other girls?"

Jen pointed at me. "You're very sharp, Katie."

I thought a moment. "That concept came from Freud. Except he said it was true for straight people. Straight children are attracted to their opposite sex parent, so it would make sense that gay children are attracted to their same sex parent. But Freud's concept was directed toward everyone as a norm, not a disorder."

Jen laughed. "No, no, Katie. You were disconnected from your mom, remember?"

I shook my head. "I really wasn't. I was breast fed. My mom is the one who stayed home and took care of me as a baby and a toddler. It wasn't until I was older that I realized I was more like my dad. Yet, being a tomboy doesn't make girls gay either."

Jen appeared impatient. "Look, Katie, I don't know about Freud but—"

"You're practicing psychotherapy and you don't know about Freud? What kind of credentials do you have? An MD maybe?"

"Okay," Jen took the hands of the girls sitting next to her. "We're going to close in prayer now."

I felt as if someone had just poured a bucket of ice water on my head. The shock of the cold dribbled down my body, numbing me. I tuned everyone out as the prayer went on. I realized no one there, not Jen, not Pastor Leroy, not Harry or Ruth, no one knew what they were doing, or talking about. Of course, I thought. They didn't respect science.

When we broke up, Amanda came to me. "Wow, you're really smart."

Karen walked by. "Wow, you're such a nerd."

I laughed. "Thank you."

"Don't trip about her," Amanda said.

Keisha joined us as we walked toward the cafeteria. "Oh my gosh, Katie. You gotta break it down for me. I don't know what you were saying, but you made Jen look stupid. I bet she's pissed."

"Yup," Amanda said.

Keisha glanced at her watch. "We still had seventeen more minutes in the session. Whatever you were saying really got to

her." She turned to Amanda. "Do you understand it?"

"Sort of," Amanda said. She turned to me. "You should really break it down for us."

"Let's get lunch first."

We were in the cafeteria, eating fried chicken and mashed potatoes. My appetite was a lot healthier. I waited until Keisha and Amanda looked to me expectantly. I explained. "Jen says our sexual attraction toward other girls stems from a need that was never satisfied during childhood. Basically, we want other girls because we didn't get it from our moms."

"Okay," Keisha said. "I'm following."

"But Freud, who is the father of psychoanalysis, says that concept goes for straight people.

He says every child goes through sexual stages, where the child has to resolve a conflict. If the conflict isn't resolved, it becomes a permanent part of the psyche. For instance, in the oral stage, a child should get oral satisfaction from sucking a nipple. If a child isn't orally satisfied, he develops an oral fixation."

Amanda laughed. "That's why so many guys are obsessed with boobs."

"And girls," Keisha added.

"That's why people smoke cigarettes or chew on their nails," I added.

"Makes sense so far," Amanda said. "Go on."

"According to Freud, in the phallic stage, a child is focused on their genitals. The boy is sexually attracted to his mother, and wants to eliminate his father. It's called the Oedipus complex. After realizing he can't compete with his father, he identifies with him."

"If you can't beat em, join em," Amanda said.

"Right." I continued. "It's more complicated with women. I don't agree with this part. He says all girls wish to have a penis."

"What?" Keisha said. "That's ridiculous. I love being a girl. Penises are disgusting all the way around. Why the heck would I want to have one?"

Amanda laughed. "Sometimes I have penis envy, but I think it's normal. Guys have vagina envy, they just don't admit it. It's like the grass is greener on the other side."

"Well, according to Freud, the girl wants her father's penis. Because she can't have it, she identifies with her mom."

"Let me get this straight," Amanda said, "our sexual identity is based on a sexual desire toward the opposite sex parent?"

"That's Freud's theory," I said.

Keisha asked, "Why couldn't it work the other way around for gay people?"

"That's my point," I said. "Freud says fixation in the phallic

stage results in homosexuality, and those fixated are reckless and narcissistic."

"Hmm." Amanda looked up in thought. "So, if the kid doesn't resolve the conflict, they become gay? And reckless and narcissistic?"

"According to Freud."

Keisha shook her head. "But that's not true." Not all gay people are reckless and narcissistic."

"Right," I replied.

Amanda looked up in thought and nodded. "I'm pretty sure in Freud's day, he didn't have a bunch of people admitting they're gay and volunteering to be studied."

"In other words," I said, "he had missing information. Phallic fixation might cause permanent same-sex attractions, but it doesn't mean all gay people have a phallic fixation."

"I sure don't," Keisha said.

"Neither do I," I replied.

"I think I might," Amanda said. "But who cares if I do? If Freud's theory applies to me, it's also permanent. That means I'm wasting my time here."

"Wow," Keisha said. "Information overload. I don't know what to think."

"How about this," Amanda said. "The only doctors who try to fix gay people are religious. They've been banned from all American psychological associations. Normal doctors with licenses and credentials don't do it."

"How do you know?" Keisha asked.

"I was looking for one. If I was going to be cured of being gay, I wanted it to be because I was sick, not because my parents are Christian. But the doctors say I'm not sick. I tried to tell my parents, but they don't care. It's like they got sucked into this big black hole, and I don't even recognize them anymore."

"Is it good change or bad?" I asked.

"It's both," Amanda said. "My parents aren't alcoholics anymore. That's actually a miracle, and the only reason why I give this Jesus guy a chance. But some rules are stupid. My dad actually cut his long hair because the pastor told him he had to. He had long hair since like the seventies. I think he's brainwashed."

Keisha sat up straight. "So, because he follows the rules, that makes him brainwashed?"

Amanda looked irritated. "It's a stupid rule. My dad's not in his right mind. If the Bible said to kill people, you would. Oh wait, that already happened."

Keisha stood up and walked away.

"What's her problem?" Amanda asked.

"The Bible is sacred to her," I said. "You've just degraded it."

"Oh my god." Amanda shook her head. "I'm just telling the truth. Is she that out of touch?"

I pressed my lips together. "You gotta understand, Amanda. Keisha and I were taught that if we don't believe in the Bible, I mean every single word, then we'll go to Hell. It's not just a matter of life and death. It's a matter of eternal life and eternal death."

Amanda shook her head as she contemplated. "I feel sorry for her." She looked up at me. "But you're smart, Katie. You can see through this, right? Look at history. Religion was always used to control people. Even now, most politicians say they're Christian, but only to get votes."

"You're right about that," I said. "Religion is corrupt. It's always going to be, but it doesn't negate the existence of God. I'm not sure about the Bible. It's kinda scary not knowing what's true and what isn't. The only thing in this world I'm absolutely sure of, is that there is a God, he loves me, and I want to worship him."

Amanda exhaled hard again. "I respect that, but only because I know you aren't brainwashed, and it's a miracle my parents are clean and sober. Do you think Keisha will still be mad later?"

"Nah," I said. "Just give her some time. She'll forget about it by tonight." I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned. It was Linda and Karen.

"Hey, Katie. I thought what you said today was pretty thought-provoking," Linda said.

Karen raised one eyebrow. "I wouldn't be surprised if they kicked you out of here." They walked away.

"Uh," I started, "was that a compliment or insult?"

Amanda smirked. "I think a little of both."

It was clear everyone was going to have their own opinions. Some people were going to believe everything they said. Others were going to reject everything they said. Some, like me, would analyze it all.

FOR THE REST of the day, we were excused to have free time. Keisha, Amanda and I were at the pool. Some of our cabin mates were there, but everyone did their own thing. It was hot out. The smell of chlorine tickled my nose.

I was sitting at the edge of the pool with my feet in the water. Keisha and Amanda were swimming. I was thinking about the day I met Jay. She introduced herself in gym class. I was nervous. I missed her so much.

Linda approached and sat next to me. "Hey, Katie. I have to tell you something."

"What's up?"

"Well, you had a visitor today. I was at the Center Pavilion when I saw her walk in. I went to talk to her, but Pastor Leroy got to her first. He sent her away, said you couldn't have visitors."

"I can't have visitors? Was it my mom?"

"She didn't look like a mom." Linda blushed and adjusted her glasses. "She was really cute. Her name was Kirsten. She looked like she was desperate to talk to you."

"Omigod." I recalled the night at the MGM. Jay had a fake ID. Her name was Kirsten Walker. "Omigod." I stood up.

"Is everything okay?" Linda stood.

"Yes. Thank you for telling me." I waved at Amanda and Keisha.

"Who's the girl?"

"My girlfriend. I mean my ex-girlfriend." I saw I had gotten Amanda and Keisha's attention. "Need to talk to you guys." I turned back to Linda. "Do you know where she went?"

"Pastor Leroy made her leave. I saw her get in her car and go."

My heart dropped. She drove out here to Phoenix, to see me, and Pastor Leroy sent her away without even telling me. I was pissed.

The girls swam over. "What's up Katie?"

"Jay was here." I pointed my thumb at Linda. "Linda just told me she came and Pastor Leroy sent her away." I noticed Linda backing away. "Wait, Linda. You can kick it with us."

Linda shook her head. "Karen's waiting for me. Thanks, though."

Amanda laughed. "Sounds like Karen got her in check."

Keisha agreed. "Talk about a control freak."

"Anyway, guys, Jay was here. Pastor Leroy sent her away."

Amanda shook her head. "What a dick."

"I can't believe he would do that," Keisha said.

"I can." I glanced at my watch. "My appointment is in an hour. I'm gonna bring it up to Jen."

I WALKED INTO Jen's office. The room looked different. It was a little warmer, with a purple and green theme. Some pictures were exchanged with paintings, and there was a large wooden cross above the desk. Pastor Leroy sat in its seat.

"Welcome, Kate-Lynn."

I cleared my throat. "Thank you pastor, but its Katie."

He looked up and gave a fake smile. "Please sit, Kate-Lynn."

I rolled my eyes and took a seat. "Where's Jen?"

He studied a folder on his desk. "Something came up and she

had to leave suddenly. No matter, though, because I'll oversee your cabin. Ruth and I, that is. If there is any problem in the cabin itself," he glanced at me, "Ruth is able to come in and handle things." His eyes were on the folder again. "I understand you've been out of control. That's not okay. I'd put you in a private cabin but I see it did you no good." He faced me and folded his hands.

There was a burning sensation in my chest. I wished I could breathe fire on him. "What are you going to do with me?"

"An exorcism."

I laughed. "You're serious?"

"Dead serious."

"With all due respect, Pastor Leroy, your judgment is way off. If you think I'm demon possessed, well it's no wonder you think homosexuality is demonic."

Pastor Leroy narrowed his eyes. "Enlighten me, Kate-Lynn."

"It seems like you fear what you don't understand, and then you just say it's demonic."

Pastor Leroy shook his head. "My dear, you need Jesus. Have you truly accepted Jesus as your Lord and Savior?"

I laughed. "Yes, Pastor Leroy. My father is a pastor."

"That doesn't mean anything. Knowing about Jesus and knowing Jesus are two different things."

"I understand that, Pastor, and I appreciate your concern, but you don't know me. You had no right to send my visitor away today. I read the brochure. I'm allowed to have visitors."

"Not gay visitors."

"How do you know she was gay?"

Pastor Leroy chuckled. "Are you going to look me in the eyes and tell she's not?"

"I'd like to call my father now."

"Not until after I speak to him." He glanced at his watch. "I'll be right back."

Pastor Leroy left the office for a few minutes. When he came back, he picked up the phone, pushed a few buttons and handed me the receiver. "I'll be outside."

I was surprised he gave me the privacy I wanted. I put the phone to my ear. "Hello."

"Hey, kiddo." It was my dad.

"Hi, Dad."

"I'm only going to stay on the phone for a few minutes so make it fast."

"I don't wanna be here. This is stupid. Pastor Leroy wants to perform an exorcism."

Dad laughed. "Sweetie, have you been making your head spin all the way around again? I hope you're not vomiting green stuff."

"Exactly, Dad. This place is a joke. I have so many questions to ask you when I get home."

"Like what?"

"Well, like science and the inerrancy of the Bible."

"Katie, you're treading on dangerous ground."

"I know, I know."

"The Bible is up for interpretation, Kate. Religion and science don't have to conflict. The conflict is only in the mind. It just depends how you perceive things. It's okay to believe in science. You know I do."

I already felt better.

"But that doesn't make the Bible errant. And it doesn't mean you get to write this program off." Ugh. "Listen to them, Kate. Let them do what they need to do. When you get home, we'll talk about it."

"But Dad—"

"No buts. I gave them authority, I won't take it away. We'll talk when you get home. Okay?"

"Fine."

"I love you, kiddo."

"I love you too, Dad." I hung up and left the office before Pastor Leroy could come back.

As I walked back to the cabin, I recalled everything that had happened so far at camp. For the first time, I was challenging my religion. I didn't realize it could be done. I never evaluated my beliefs so much. If the counselors here didn't shove the Bible down my throat, and threaten me with Hell, and punish me for asking questions, I may have never done so much questioning. The harder they pushed, the more I questioned. If Pastor Leroy failed to see that I'm a real Christian with questions, rather than a demon possessed God-hater, why would I listen to him at all?

AMANDA CALLED OUT from the top bunk as I walked in. "Hey, Katie." All the girls in the cabin were getting ready for dinner.

"What's up?"

"What do you think about Jen being gone?"

I paused in front of the bed and leaned on the top bunk. "I haven't thought of it really. Why? What do you think?"

Amanda smirked at me. "I heard something."

"What?"

"Well, Destiny said she was a little early for her private session, and the door was a little open. Ruth said to Leroy, 'She said she couldn't do it anymore. It was something Katie said.' Then

Leroy was like, 'We gotta do something about that girl. Jen was strong in the Lord before Katie showed up.'

My eyebrows went up. "Wow. You think I pushed her to leave?"

"Uh, yeah,"

"Ahem." I turned and saw Ruth standing at the entrance to our cabin. "Cabin sixteen, as you know, Jen has taken a leave of absence. If you need anything, I'm here for you. I do have an announcement. Next Friday, on our last night here, there's going to be a dance. The boys are going to start asking for dates, starting tonight as we're having coed dinners now. They might be nervous about talking to girls, so please be nice, okay girls? Make sure you hug your cabin mates before coming to dinner." She walked out and closed the door.

Keisha came over. "I'm kinda nervous."

"Why?" Amanda asked.

"Because it's boys."

"Yeah," Amanda said, "but its gay boys."

Karen hollered as she passed us. "They're not gay anymore!"

"Oh yeah," Amanda shouted at Karen, sarcastically. "Ex-gay, silly me."

Keisha shrugged. "At least they won't be trying to get in our pants."

"Thank God," Amanda said.

HALF AN HOUR later, we were having a coed dinner in the cafeteria, for the first time since day one. It was more crowded than usual, so there was a lot of noise from people talking. The entire place smelled like meat loaf.

I heard a familiar voice. "Oh my gosh, Katie." Zach came toward my table with a tray in hand.

I stood. "Zach."

He put his tray down across from me, and Keisha moved over for him. He came and pulled me into a hug. "I can't believe you're here. I mean, I've been praying for you, but wow, my prayers have been answered."

I laughed. "I didn't know you were gay."

"I didn't know you were gay." We both sat. "Well, I had a feeling, but I wasn't sure. Everyone said you were dating Kevin, until Kevin and Emo, well, you know."

I forced the pain down and shrugged the thought off.

Zach touched my hand. "Hey, let's go to the dance together."

"Yeah, of course," I said.

"Cool. How are you doing with the program?"

"Not well. Hey, you know about Freud. Do you see any conflict with Freud's theory?"

Zach shook his head. "Surprisingly, I don't. Phallic fixation makes sense to me, although I don't think touch therapy has anything to do with it. It actually made me horny." He laughed. "Don't say anything."

"I won't." It was silent a moment.

A boy wearing a cowboy hat approached. "Hey, Zach, I thought you were gonna sit with me?"

Zach looked up with a cheesy expression. "Oh yeah, sorry. I just ran into a friend." He turned to me. "Katie, this is Eric, Eric, Katie. We go to the same school and church."

Eric tipped his hat. "Well, that's nice."

"Oh," I held out my hands toward Keisha and Amanda. "That's Keisha and Amanda." I pointed to Zach. "This is Zach and..."

"Eric." The boy tipped his hat. "It's nice to meet y'all."

"You too,"

Zach got up. "Okay, see you at the dance, Katie." They walked away.

"I think Eric is a little jealous of you, Katie," Keisha said.

Amanda laughed. "You call that ex-gay?"

I shook my head. "Nope, not even a little bit."

Keisha sighed. "I'm not feeling this dance."

"Amen," Amanda replied.

Keisha pointed her chin toward someone behind me. "I wanna go with her."

I bit my lip, trying to decide how I would turn around without looking obvious. I decided to scratch my shoulder, and make it seem as if I were trying to see if I'd gotten a mosquito bite or something. I let my eyes travel, and I saw the masculine girl, the "stud" Keisha thought was cute.

"Why don't you ask her?" Amanda said.

Keisha laughed. "I wish."

Amanda's eyes darted toward someone behind me. "I wanna go with her."

I scratched my shoulder, and looked over again. "Who?"

"She's wearing pink, with the black hair and a tattoo on her arm."

I spotted the girl. "She's kinda hot."

"Okay, but since this isn't a gay club," Keisha said. "We have to score some guys." She turned to Amanda. "Didn't you date guys once upon a time?"

"Yeah, when my life was boring."

I felt someone close by, and heard a whisper in my ear. It was

Zach. "Eric wants to go with your friend. The one with the curly hair."

I turned to Amanda. "Hey, Manda, that guy Eric wants to go to the dance with you."

Her upper lip curled. She rolled her eyes and sighed. "Okay."

Zach cleared his throat. "He's a really nice guy."

"Okay, I said okay."

"Cool. See you guys later." Zach walked away.

"Which leaves me." Keisha leaned on her elbows, with her head in her hands.

"Don't worry," I said. "You'll get a date."

Amanda leaned forward and shouted. "Hey, dude with the white shirt."

I turned and saw a boy looking toward us.

"Go to the dance with my friend." Amanda pointed toward Keisha.

Keisha's mouth dropped, but she instantly recovered with a wave.

The boy replied. "Okay." He turned to Keisha. "What's your name?"

Keisha leaned forward. "Keisha."

The boy put his hand on his ear.

"I said Keisha!"

"Cool. I'm Conrad. See you at the dance."

"Okay." Keisha slapped Amanda's arm. "I can't believe you did that."

"What? I helped you. He's cute, right?"

Keisha glanced at Conrad. "Yeah, and he isn't flaming, so that's good."

It was settled. We all had dates, and I was excited.

"THIS IS OUR final week, Cabin sixteen." Ruth was sitting on the circular bench outside our cabin. We were still filing out.

"Yay," Linda said.

"It's about time."

"Seriously."

"What?" Destiny asked. "This is so much fun. I don't wanna go home."

"That makes one of us," Amanda said.

"Well," Ruth began. "Sad to say, the program is coming to an end. For our final week, we're going to get a little more physical."

"More physical than holding each other in a chair?" Amanda asked.

"Yes," Ruth said. "If you all will follow me to the gym, I'll

show you what we need to do."

KAREN SWUNG A metal bat at a punching bag. "Take that." The rest of us surrounded her.

"Who are you hitting, Karen?" Ruth asked.

"My dad. He's such a jerk. He was never there for me." She swung the bat again.

"Do you want a new dad?" Ruth asked.

The bat hit the punching bag again. "Yes. I want a dad who cares and treats me like a princess."

"Then you must eliminate your old dad. Eliminate him."

Karen kept swinging, until she was too tired. She dropped the bat and started to cry.

Ruth took Karen into her arms. "It's okay, Karen. Your old dad's gone now. Now you have a new father, God the Father. He'll heal all your hurt." Karen cried for another minute or so.

"Okay." Karen got up and wiped her face. "I'm okay."

"Wash your face, Karen, and come back," Ruth said. "Now," she held the bat out. "Who's next?"

I stepped forward.

"Okay, Katie. Recall a time when your mother made you feel worthless."

I stopped to think, but drew blank. I tried to sort through all my memories as fast as I could.

"Could be something really simple. Maybe she neglected you."

I thought and thought. I couldn't recall a single memory of my mom making me feel neglected. "Oh. Okay," I said. "There was this one time. I was singing and making up a dance, and I wanted my mom to watch me. Well, she didn't. All she cared about was her TV show."

"How did that make you feel?" Ruth asked.

"Like I wasn't important."

"Right. The message you received was that the TV was worth more than you. Now, I want you to take that bat, and hit your mom. Get all that aggression out."

I lifted the bat. I tried to muster up any aggression I may have built up toward my mom. But, there was none. I turned to Ruth. "I don't wanna hit my mom. She didn't do anything that bad."

"Katie, the point is to let out all the frustration that's being turned into sexual energy."

"Yeah, but I don't have any frustration toward my mom. She's a good mom."

Ruth came closer to me and placed her hand on my shoulder. "Okay, Katie. Just hit the bag, and see if anything comes up."

I sighed. I lifted the bat again as Ruth stepped back. I gathered all my energy and slammed the bat against the punching bag.

"Do it again," Ruth instructed.

I hit the bag a few more times. Each time, I felt an adrenaline rush.

"Feel good?" Ruth asked.

Without a word, I kept hitting the bag, harder each time.

"Why are you hitting the bag, Katie? Where's the anger coming from?"

I screamed. "I don't wanna be gay anymore." I dropped the bat and found myself crying in Ruth's arms.

KEISHA SAT NEXT to me in the cafeteria. "That was super intense."

Amanda took the seat across from me. "Right. God, I wanted to kill my parents for real."

"I can't believe I said that." I pushed my plate away.

"That you don't wanna be gay?" Keisha asked.

"Yeah. I didn't know I felt so passionate about not wanting to be gay."

"Well," Amanda glanced at me. "We're nearing the end of the program. Katie, are you still gay?"

I thought a moment. Jay's image came to mind. I missed her so much. "Yes. I'm still in love with Jay."

"Ditto," Keisha said. "I still love Brandy." Keisha turned to Amanda. "What about you?"

Amanda chuckled. "Do you even have to ask? I don't have a girlfriend or anything, but that girl with the tattoo is smokin' hot. For real."

Keisha and I laughed.

Chapter Thirty

THE CAFETERIA WAS dark. The tables had been moved, and there was now a bunch of equipment for the disco lights. The music wasn't too loud. We could hear each other talking. There was a long table with cookies and punch. The dance floor was still empty. Our dates hadn't arrived yet. The three of us just stood around waiting.

"Hey look," Keisha pointed toward the stud. "Her date's a flamer." The stud-girl was with a very feminine guy.

Amanda laughed. "That looks weird. She's the boy and he's the girl."

"Right," I said. "It's so gay, that it's straight."

Keisha's eyebrows went up. "They could get married and have kids."

"Yeah, but people would still be opposed to it," Amanda said. I chuckled. "Probably."

After a while, the cafeteria became filled with people. Conrad was the first to approach us. He went straight for Keisha. "Keisha, right?"

Keisha blushed. She glanced over at us. "Yeah."

He reached out his hand. "Well, come on, let's dance."

Keisha looked at the dance floor. "The dance floor is empty."

Conrad dropped his hand. "We're supposed to get the party started. Unless you're afraid or something." He flashed a charming smile and extended his hand again. "Let's dance."

Amanda and I watched as Keisha took his hand and they made their way to the dance floor. Soon after they started dancing, more and more people joined them.

"There they are." Zach rushed toward us, Eric in tow. "Hello ladies."

"Hi," Amanda and I said in unison. We all stared at each other for a moment.

"Well," Eric said, "let's dance." Eric took Amanda's hand and led her to the dance floor. As they were walking, she looked over her shoulder, and mouthed the words "help me."

I laughed. Zach offered his arm, so I took it. "Zach, do you think you'll start dating girls?"

"Yeah, I intend to." We went to the dance floor.

He intended to date girls. I chewed on that for a little while. Did I intend to date guys? Well, the plan was to see how things

went with Marc. The funny thing was I felt I loved Marc, but I didn't miss him. I thought he was cute and I liked when he hugged me and held me in his arms. But, I never really wanted to kiss him. I only felt that way about Jay. God, I missed her. I had to push those thoughts away before I became depressed.

The DJ played a slow song. Zach came closer and put his arms around my waist. I put my arms over his shoulders. "Katie, do you ever feel called to ministry?"

I thought a moment. "No. I feel called to academics. I don't know what I'm supposed to do after college. I just know I'm supposed to learn all I can. Why, Zach, do you?"

"Yeah, I think so. I want to help gay people overcome homosexuality. This stuff is super hard, huh?"

I thought of everything I went through so far. Running away, becoming a bum, losing Emo. A tear slid down my cheek. I wiped it before he could notice. "Yeah. It's hard."

"Well, what if there was someone at our church who was ready to help anyone with homosexual tendencies. Would it have helped you?"

I thought about it. "Well, Jen and Leroy didn't help me because they treated me like a subordinate. I think if you can treat people as equals, and respect what they think and believe, you might help them."

"Okay. I'm worried about you, Katie. You seem to be carrying a lot of weight."

"I am. I'm still in love with Jay Miller. I don't know what to do. Plus, there's Emo. You know he asked me to teach him about God, and I didn't. He wanted to learn, Zach."

"I'm sorry. Try not to regret it. Just learn from it. Next time someone wants to learn about God, teach them right away."

"Pastor Leroy is performing an exorcism on me."

Zach laughed. "He thinks you're demon possessed? Oh, that's hilarious. Oh, hey. I've got it good with Pastor Leroy. I think he thinks I'm his son. I can vouch for you."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Don't sweat it. I'll just let him know we're friends and we go to the same church, and I know for sure you aren't demon possessed. He'll listen."

"Awesome." Thanks, God.

"I know Pastor Leroy can be strict. But, he's actually a really good pastor."

"I'm glad he was able to help you, Zach."

The rest of the dance was fun. Amanda and Keisha got into trouble for dancing with each other. It was hilarious. The last few days of Camp Ex-gay was laid back. We stopped analyzing

everything and just enjoyed each other's company. We swapped emails. The next thing I knew, Zach and I were on a shuttle back to Las Vegas.

Chapter Thirty-one

THE VAN BROUGHT us back to our church. Our parents were supposed to pick us up from there. I was looking forward to seeing everyone. I felt accomplished. I actually survived ex-gay camp. Although the results were quite opposite from what I expected, I was still proud to say I survived.

As we pulled in to the campus, I noticed the parking lot was full. I heard loud music. It was a Friday night, so I thought it must've been a concert. The bus pulled over, and I followed Zach off the bus. We threw our bags over our shoulders and went into the auditorium.

"I wonder who's here," I said.

"Sounds like Everyday Sunday." Everyday Sunday is an awesome Christian rock band.

I listened. "Oh my gosh. I think you're right."

"You like them?"

I walked faster. "They're awesome, are you kidding me? Do you think they're live?"

"We're about to find out."

We found out all right. Soon as we walked through the door, the first thing I saw was a huge banner that read Congratulations Katie and Zach. The band was on stage and rocking out. The drummer was encased in a clear plastic box, and the music was so loud, I could barely hear someone was calling me.

"Katie." When I was sure I heard my name, I turned and saw Wendy, pulling me into a hug. "Congrats, Katie. I knew you could do it. I knew you weren't really gay."

"I'm so glad you're back." I turned around and Chanel pulled me into a hug. "I'm so proud of you. I was so worried about you. You're my bestie, Katie. I'm glad you aren't gay anymore."

I felt an arm around me. "We love you, Katie. It's so good to see you," Janice said. The song that was playing died down, and I heard the voice of my father on the loud speaker.

"Sorry to interrupt. I know you're all enjoying this awesome band, Everyday Sunday." He moved toward the band. "Thanks again, for coming out to our church, guys. It's come to my attention that Kate-Lynn and Zach are in the house."

My heart plummeted to the floor. As I looked around, I saw happy faces looking at me with approval and pride. They had thrown this huge party to celebrate me turning straight. They were

celebrating, while deep inside me, I was hurting. Now I was accepted. Now, since I've ignored the bleeding chest wound of my broken heart, a heart that none of these people could embrace until now, now they were proud of me. Now that I'd sacrificed my right arm to walk into the doors of this church, now I was welcomed. Now that I've managed to destroy the heart of the only person I've ever loved. Now, I was accepted.

I had an epiphany. As the pain in my chest began to rise, I realized it wasn't worth it. These people weren't worth the pain I went through. They never loved me anyway. If I have to sacrifice everything in order to be loved and accepted, it isn't real love and it isn't real acceptance. Upon realizing this, a deep hatred came over me. I looked over at Zach, but he was smiling.

In my anger, I turned and went for the door. I left, and in a hurry. When I realized that Wendy, Chanel and Janice were following me, I turned around and screamed, "Leave me alone." I ran.

I ran until I was sure no one was behind me. As I slowed, my heart broke once again. I had come full circle, again. I was running away, again. Tears streamed down my face. Why hadn't the ex-gay thing worked? I tried my best. I broke Jay's heart. I denied myself love. I even considered dating Marc. Still, I was a God-loving soul trapped in a lesbian's body, and I had no other options left. Hopelessness came over me, and I blamed God.

"I did everything you wanted me to." I was shouting as I walked down the empty street. "I gave you everything. I have nothing left. Nothing. Why do you hate me?" I wiped a tear that had escaped on my cheek, and a sound just to my left startled me. As I turned to see what it was, I noticed a city bus had stopped, pulled over, and opened its door. I felt an impression in my heart: come.

There was nothing to lose. A sense of hope relieved me. I reached into my pocket and found a couple of dollar bills. I climbed on the bus and inserted the money. The driver gave me a grouchy look, and I walked toward the back, where I took a seat. I leaned my head on the window, and recalled the past few months.

I remembered the look in Jay's eyes the first time we spoke. She was nervous and biting her fingernail. I laughed. I was nervous too. I remembered the first time we kissed. I remembered how she ran away with me. I remembered the first time we got wasted and smoked pot together. She was so cute. I remembered how I wasn't there when her dad was hurt, and how she left. I remembered Marc. I thought of breaking Jay's heart yet again. I started to cry. I'd hurt her so bad. How could she ever forgive me?

I thought of Dad. I thought of the time he cried when I told him

I was gay. I remembered him yelling and taking my door down. I thought of my church friends. I cried. They had no idea what I was going through. It was so easy for them to judge me. It was so easy to be condescending. They said they loved me, and that they were my friends, but they had no idea how bad it hurt. They didn't know me. They didn't understand me. Just as I was getting lost in my thoughts, a woman boarded the bus and made her way to the back.

The woman reminded me of my grandmother, except that she was Black. She even walked with a cane like my grandma. There was a genuine, warm and comforting feel to her. There was something about her. She had a presence. She sat next to me. "You don't mind me sittin' with ya, do ya, darlin'?"

I shook my head.

"Good, 'cause I really don't like sittin' alone. Old lady like me'll get lonely."

I tried to hide my face by looking down and out the window. "Yeah."

"I tell ya, this town'll wear ya down. So what's your story, baby? Why ya look so sad?"

I hesitated to answer her, but I felt it was safe to talk to her. "I ran away from home a few months ago. Then I came back. I thought everything was going to be better when I came back, but I was wrong. I don't want to run again. I don't know what else to do."

The woman reached into her hand bag, and pulled out a book. It was old and tattered. "Baby, this here is the Word of God. I don't go nowhere without it. In here, you'll find all the answers."

Tears ran down my face. "The Bible hurts me. It's a weapon against me, but I'm not evil." I covered my face with my hands and forced the pain back down, but a few tears escaped. "I swear I'm not evil."

"Baby, I know ya ain't evil. You's a child of God, ya hear? Listen, look at me, child."

I wiped my face and turned to her. "Yeah?"

"Satan, our enemy, uses the Bible, too. He knows it better than any man on the face of the earth. He uses it to hurt people, and to divide people. He uses it to turn people away from God. He uses people, Christians, to carry out his work. People have committed the most heinous sins in the name of God. Child, if the Bible hurts you, it's because Satan is behind it."

"Aren't we supposed to believe everything in the Bible?"

"Yes, child, believe it, but don't take it for granted. You have to study it. You have to think critically. Child, Satan speaks in the Bible, too. Them men who wrote the Bible were inspired by God, yes, but they were also made of flesh and therefore influenced by Satan, too. Sometimes people quote the Bible, baby, and they ain't

got no clue what they sayin'. Them words don't mean nothin' without the Holy Ghost. Without God, them words are like poison on the fangs of the Serpent."

"But I'm gay. The Bible says it's wrong."

"Baby, the words in the Bible say it's wrong. The words in the Bible say women ain't 'posed to talk. The words say we 'posed to own slaves and kill witches. You know the difference 'tween the holy words of God and the evil words of Satan?"

"Child, when I came in here, I felt your spirit in anguish. Your soul is torn, and you's in agony. Ask yourself, baby, is it God hurting you?"

I thought a moment. "God wouldn't want me to hurt like this. Are you saying it's okay to be gay?"

She shook her head. "I ain't saying all that. I'm saying you needa get closer to God. Only God can tell you what the Bible means. Pastors, priests, the Pope, baby, they all human. They all just guessin'. Ask God to reveal the truth. He'll do it."

I frowned. I hoped she would give me a straight answer. "What should I do in the meantime?"

"Go home. Honor your folks, but don't let them wound your spirit. Then, go in your room, hit them knees on the floor and open your heart. No matter what happens, child, don't never turn your back on God."

"Okay." The bus pulled over. I could feel her eyes on me and I sensed she was smiling.

"Well whatcha know, this my stop." She hugged me and said, "you gon be alright, child. You gon be alright." Then she left.

As the bus pulled away, I thought of everything she said and I began to pray in a whisper.

"I want to know the truth. Please heal my heart. Please give me peace. I love you. I swear I do."

The message: I know you love me, Kate-Lynn, and I love you more than you can possibly imagine. My hand is upon you.

"What does that mean?"

It means you belong to me. It means I'll never let you go. You have my love, my grace, my protection.

"I need to know the answers."

Yes, but not tonight.

"Why not?"

Go to your father, Kate-Lynn. He loves you.

"Okay. I will."

DAD CAME TOWARD me as I walked back into the church. Everyone was gone except a group of elders and their families. He

hugged me tight, and I could feel some anger. "Katie, you promised you would never run again."

I pulled away. "I know. I'm sorry. I just had to get out of here. I had to clear my head."

"And what do you think?" Mom came up from behind Dad and listened.

"Well, at camp I realized that no one knew what they were doing. They aren't really therapists and it isn't really working. They punished me for asking questions. I still cooperated though."

He replied. "Then, you came home, and we hurt you somehow."

"Well, I realized how much everyone loved me, only on the condition that I change. That love is conditional, and it's nowhere near being worth the pain I suffered to attain it. God doesn't love me like that, Dad. His love is unconditional."

"Katie, we loved you even before you went to ex-gay camp."

I looked away. "No, Dad, you hated this part of me."

"Katie, being gay isn't part of you."

"Phillip," my mom took my dad's hand. "Let's leave this between her and God. We've done enough damage. It's not our job to judge her."

Dad looked down for a moment. When he looked up, there were tears in his eyes. "Your mother is wise." He picked up Mom's hand and kissed it. "I'm sorry. We love and accept you just the way you are, baby girl. You don't have to earn it. Just promise me you won't turn your back on God."

I hugged him. "I promise, Dad."

I'm sure Dad wasn't thrilled about the fact that the program didn't work, but I could see he was relieved. He didn't have to worry about my eternal life/damnation anymore. It was between God and me. I only hoped my small group would be as cool.

WE WERE IN group, at her house. We were drinking root-beer floats in her bedroom. Wendy said, "Katie, we love you. We just don't love your sin."

"Well, it's a good thing you aren't my judge," I replied.

"But, Katie, the Bible says homosexuals won't enter the Kingdom of God."

I put my mug down on a coaster. "Read the verse again, Wendy. Every single human falls into one of those categories. Including you. You don't get to judge me."

A few moments passed before she spoke. "You're right, Katie. I apologize."

"Katie, I want to apologize too," Janice said. "None of us really

mean to hurt you, or to judge you. It's so easy for us to be judgmental sometimes."

I agreed. "Yeah. It's a challenge for all Christians."

"Okay, Katie," Chanel said, "you're my bestie, even if you're gay."

"Can you be nice to Jay?"

Her eyebrows went up. "Yeah, I'll say hi, or something. You gotta fill us in on the lesbian lingo. I don't wanna say the wrong thing."

I exhaled. I couldn't believe my friends were actually being supportive. "Well, just stay away from words like fag and dyke, and you should be good."

"Really?" Janice asked. "Don't gay people call each other those words?"

"Yeah, but it's different when we do it. It's kinda like the N word. Black people say it, but out of respect, we don't."

"Okay," Janice said. "I don't ever wanna make that mistake."

I loved the fact that they were willing to learn, and they were able to respect. For the first time since I met Jay, I was beginning to see my small group as family again. Of course, not all my church friends responded with acceptance.

I WAS SITTING in the coffee shop again on the church campus, on the phone. "I don't know why it didn't work, it just didn't."

"You didn't try hard enough." It was Marc. It felt as if we were fighting.

"You don't know that, Marc. You don't know what happened at camp."

"Then tell me. Why can't you just explain it to me?"

"Because nothing I say will be good enough for you. I'm not ex-gay. I'm not straight."

"You're still in love with Jay."

"That too."

"That's why it didn't work."

"That's just stupid. I'm supposed to be ex-gay before I got there?" Silence.

"Look, I don't know what to say, Katie. I can't be just your friend. Call me when you decide you want to do the right thing."

"You mean the right thing for you."

"We're not getting anywhere. I'm getting off the phone. Take care, Katie." He hung up.

Ugh. Marc was impossible, but it was easy to let him go. I realized I never loved Marc. I only loved the fact he loved me. I'm not sure how much he loved me, but I knew I never really

loved him.

My eyes roamed around the café as I leaned back in my seat.

Zach took a seat across from me. "So, you're ex-ex-gay?"

I exhaled. I had a feeling this conversation wasn't going to go well either. "I think that's a stupid label."

He leaned back in his seat. "That sucks, Katie. I was looking forward to getting to know you better."

"You can still get to know me, weirdo."

Zach pressed his lips together. "Um. No, I can't. I'm trying real hard to do this straight thing. I don't want you to be a bad influence on me. You understand, right?"

"Can I ask you something personal, Zach?"

"Sure."

"Why do you wanna be straight so bad?"

He leaned forward and folded his hands. "Because I love God."

"I love him, too, and I wanna be what God wants me to be. Right now, I'm gay. It's the honest truth. What about you? Can you honestly tell me you aren't attracted to guys anymore?"

Zach shook his head and frustration painted his face. "You don't understand, Katie. Being a lesbian is easy. Everyone likes lesbians. Try being a gay man. Try being a Christian gay man. You wouldn't want it either."

I frowned. "I'm sorry your life is so difficult."

Zach shrugged. "It's okay. I'm doing it God's way. That's all that matters. What about you? Won't you do it God's way?"

I looked outside and watched a bird flutter through a tree. "I'm not sure what God's way is for me. I'm still figuring it out." I turned back to Zach. "In the meantime, I'm not going to torture myself."

Zach scrunched his eyebrows. "You don't believe God is inflicting this pain as punishment?"

"No. God loves us more than that, Zach. Much more."

He leaned back again. "I know he loves us." He placed his fist on the table. "But parental love is tough."

"Would your parents torture you for punishment?"

He laughed and shook his head. "Look, Katie, this is what I mean. It's like you have the gift of influence, and I don't want you to steer me wrong. I'll respect your decisions if you respect mine."

"Deal."

"I'm not going to talk to you anymore."

My heart froze in mid-beat, and I felt as if I was struggling to breathe. I never realized how much I wanted Zach as a friend, until that moment. "Okay." I forced the pain back down. "Good luck, Zach."

“Good luck, Katie.”

A tear slid down my face as I watched Zach walk away. After that encounter, I started to dread talking to Jay again. What if it went bad? What if she never wanted to talk to me either? How would I cope with that? I missed her so much. God, don’t let her hate me.

Chapter Thirty-two

I SAW JAY at school, sitting on a lunch table, outside the cafeteria. The sky was grey. It reminded me of the day it rained in the park. The day we fell in love. Her skater friends were there. I approached her. Either she hadn't seen me, or she pretended not to, because I had to tap her shoulder to get her attention.

Jay wheeled around. Her eyebrows went up and her mouth opened slightly. "Katie." She stood up.

"I..." I drew blank. Searching for words was like trying to see in the dark. "Jay, I love you. I know you hate me, but I love you. I've been losing my mind trying to figure this gay thing out. I know you came to camp, and I'm sorry they wouldn't let you see me."

A girl walked up, kissed Jay on the cheek, said, "Call me," and walked away.

I took a step back as I turned my head. It was like someone had just socked me in the stomach. I couldn't breathe. I wanted to scream at the top of my lungs. How stupid could I have been to think Jay would still be single?

Jay watched the girl walk away, and turned to me. "Katie, you're insane. You're effing crazy. You don't know what you want or who you are. You're like a rollercoaster. You broke my heart, Katie. I went to camp to tell you I was moving on."

Tears fell down my face. There was nothing to lose now, especially if she belonged to someone else. There was a panic in my soul, desperation in my heart. Her friends were staring and I didn't care. "I know I broke your heart, and I hate that I did that. I'm ready to accept myself, now. I went through the ex-gay thing. It didn't work. My dad says he accepts me the way I am."

Jay chuckled. "Nice of your dad. He also said we could only be friends."

"Yes, you're right. But I'm not worried about him anymore. I'm not a kid who needs his approval. I mean, I'm about to be an adult. I'll move out soon." I took a deep breath. "UNLV is a good enough school."

Jay's eyes stared directly into me, to my very bones, stripping me of every layer of defense, like the first time. She grabbed and held me. "Stop crying, Katie. I hate seeing you cry."

I pulled away to look her in the eyes. "Jay, please, can't you see I'm sincere and I'm trying?" My voice cracked, and the tears flowed steadily. "You're the only person I've ever loved, and I love you so

much." I was silent a moment as I watched her face. She looked hesitant, and it filled me with anxiety. The tears kept streaming. She wiped them with her hands. "Was that your girlfriend?"

Jay's hands were shaking. She whispered. "No, just a girl."

"I wanna be your girlfriend, Jay. I know I messed up so many times, but please. Can't you see I'm serious?"

Jay held me again and kissed my head. "Yeah, I can see that." She took my head in her hands and stared at me for a long moment. I could tell her eyes were searching for something. She was scared, but she still loved me. She glanced down, and back up at me. "What about the guy?"

"I never did anything with him, and I told him I was gay. Jay, I was just trying to be straight because it's what everyone wanted me to be. Please believe me."

"What about the next time someone tells you you're going to hell?"

"I'll tell them to go to hell."

"What about your church friends?"

"They've accepted me."

"What if your dad tells you to stop talking to me?"

Was she really taking me back? "I'll just hide it until I turn eighteen. I promise, Jay."

"Promise you won't nag me to go to church."

"I promise."

Jay came closer and took me into her arms. "I still love you, Katie."

Those words meant everything to me. I hugged her tight, and when she pulled away, without thinking, I kissed her. I heard guys cheering from all around. I didn't feel like putting on a show, but I wanted to kiss her. I didn't care what anyone else thought. When she pulled away, she took my hand. She grabbed her back pack from off the table, threw it over her shoulder and said, "Let's walk."

The cheering persisted as we strolled hand in hand. "Guys are so dumb, huh?"

I laughed. "Guys are guys. Where are we going?"

"I was thinking the park around the block, so we can talk some more."

I hesitated. "I love that park. It was where everything started. But, I don't wanna ditch school. My dad trusted me enough to let me come back to school. I don't wanna betray that."

Jay laughed. "Okay, my goodie-two-shoe."

"Shut up." It was silent for a few minutes, as we stared at each other.

I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe Jay gave me another

chance. I didn't deserve it, and so I would make it up to her. I'd be the best girlfriend I could ever be. I told her everything that happened at camp. I told her how things ended with Marc. We talked and talked.

Chapter Thirty-three

THE ROOM WAS cold. The sounds of the machines and the smell of medicine reminded me of the cold reality Emo was gone. Kevin was asleep. His head was in a brace and his face was scarred from chin to forehead, with stitches. He looked like Frankenstein. I started to cry. Jay tapped my shoulder. As I looked up at Kevin, I saw he was opening his eyes.

Kevin's eyes were pleading, as if he was in terrible pain, and we had the power to stop it. His eyes shot toward a little table beside the bed. There was a clip board with a piece of paper and pen. Jay took it and placed the pen in his hand, and held the clipboard for him to write.

His handwriting was terrible. I could barely make it out.

I'm sorry.

I didn't know how to respond. I could've said, "It's okay," but that would've been a lie. Nothing about the fact he murdered my best friend was okay. "How are you?" I asked.

Kevin started scribbling. *Regret. I should've died too.*

"You survived for a reason, Kev."

Emo was strong, didn't care what people thought. I'm a pussy. Miss him. Hate myself. Kevin paused and closed his eyes, when he opened them, Jay put her hand on his shoulder. "You need rest, Kev. Just get better."

He appeared to be straining for energy. *Please stay a little while. You're my only friends.*

"Okay," Jay said. "We'll come every day."

Kevin scribbled. *Does God hate me?*

Upon reading those words, my heart began to pick up its pace. I remember what it felt like to think God hated me. I remembered what Zach said, about teaching people about God right away. I felt a rush of satisfaction come over me as I realized I could help him.

I looked Kevin in the eyes. "God doesn't hate you, Kevin. God loves you. He wants to forgive you, and all you have to do is ask."

Kevin closed his eyes, as tears fell onto the mattress. A minute later, the machines started making noises. There were beeping and tones, and an anxiety rose through my chest. The nurse ran in, and she turned to an intercom, "Code blue!" The nurse pushed me and Jay out of the room. There was a little window in the hall. We couldn't hear, but we could see. A doctor and orderly rushed in. Every minute felt like an hour. I started to panic as I watched. They

put an oxygen mask on his face. They ripped his gown open at the chest and tried to jump start his heart. They tried a few times. The line on the heart monitor was flat. They stopped rushing. The doctor looked at his watch. The nurse placed the sheet over Kevin's head.

I buried my face onto Jay's shoulder and wept. I couldn't stop crying. Kevin was gone. That's all I could think. Kevin was gone. Kevin was gone.

Afterword

TEENAGERS ARE REAL people. If you're an adult, you might remember what it was like when you were a teen. You might think you know everything there is to know about being a teen, but you're wrong. The world is a different place now.

We aren't kids. We have the right to speak, and whether you approve of it or not, we have the will to act. We know sex and violence is a part of life. Running away is always an option, and drugs and alcohol are always available. We know people die, people kill, and it hurts like hell when it's the people you love. Of course, we don't know everything. We may be wrong about some things. We're capable of making catastrophic mistakes. That's why we need parents.

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ISBN: 978-1-61929-072-3

Strangers

by DeJay

Justina Murphy has lived on the streets since the age of thirteen. Outed by her best friend, she was beaten till she passed out and then her mother threw her out of the house. She has spent the last thirty years building a life for herself. A place where she feels safe, has the amenities she was deprived of and finally a certain sense of peace.

Victoria Wainwright works for DCS, Department of Child Services. Her job is to convince Murphy to make changes to her very minimalist life, to open her home and her meager bank account to two strangers. She needs to do this while struggling with her own demons.

Jesse has very specific instructions from her mother. She's the eldest and responsible for her baby sister, Brianna. It's her job to look out for them and to help her Aunt learn about love, trust and family. Jesse is also struggling with her sexual identity, even in 2003 this can pose a problem when attending Catholic High School.

The three women come together, the fights are explosive, the learning curve more like an insurmountable mountain, and the results provide answers to a suicide that has hung over Murphy's head these last thirty years.

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About the Author

Luana Torres is a slam poet, writer, and an English/Theatre student. Besides freelancing for various publications and studying, Luana loves competing in poetry slams and performing at open mics. Her stage name is REACH.

I Heard the Pastor's Daughter is Gay is Luana's greatest contribution to the cause of equality. She wrote the novel to educate America on the realities of being Gay and Christian, and how gay teenagers might resort to suicide.

Luana, affectionately known as "Lu," has worked with the Diversity Committee of the Human Rights Campaign-Las Vegas, the nation's largest Human Rights Organization for LGBT Individuals. She has participated in many programs fighting for the cause of equal rights for all, including the "National Equality March on Washington."

Lu has worked toward building a bridge—a positive relationship between LGBT peoples and the Conservative Church. She has organized events by gathering leaders from both Traditional and Progressive Churches, to talk about specific issues in a safe environment. She believes that open conversation between parties will begin to make peace.

Lu was born and raised in Hawaii, but plans to travel the world. She loves the great outdoors, theatre, and of course, getting lost in a good book. Presently, Luana lives in Las Vegas with her partner Christina, their daughter Katalina, two dogs, and four cats.

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